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By S. M. Tenneshaw

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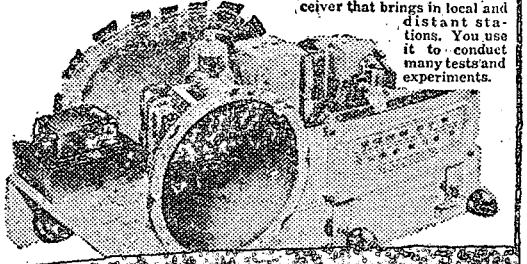

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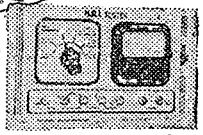

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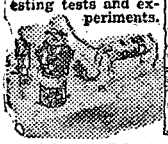

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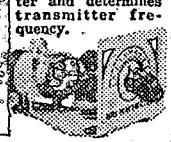

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Pan had to find the magic ring he had lost—but a little girl was searching for it too . . .

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The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

AN OLD FRIEND of yours and ours dropped in for a chat the other day. We hadn't seen Bob Bloch for nearly two years. He's been living in Milwaukee, and as he put it, "slaving like mad with the intricacies of running an advertising agency." That sort of explained the relative scarcity of Blochonian fiction in the pages of your favorite magazine. (Although you will note a new yarn by Bob beginning on page 28 of this issue.) Anyhow, we asked Bob if he had been thinking of doing a long fantasy and he replied sagely: "I've been thinking about it for a long time, but somehow, with ad headaches to contend with I took the easy way out by being just plain lazy. Or maybe I just want to be coaxed."

WE DID SOME coaxing just about then and by the time Bob left Chicago he was promising to get right to work. This morning we received a letter from him stating: "Well, I'm hard at work, but soft in the head. I find this business of writing fascinating—but not easy! But you'll have your yarn before Xmas." . . . All we'd like to add is that you readers will have it shortly after we receive it.

WE HAD another visitor too. Lester Del Rey dropped in from New York. We thought it would be the proper time to give Les a gentle coaxing, so we did. It turned out that Les didn't really have to be coaxed. "I came here to see if you'd like a long fantasy laid in the time of the Norse Gods. You're making it easy for me." That's what the man said, and we took him down to coffee and listened to the plot outline he had prepared. After a few details had been straightened out in the projected story we took Les to his train with the promise that the story would be on our desk soon. We're looking forward to it as much as you are.

GEOFF ST. REYNARD sent us a letter this week, saying that he hoped the readers of FA would like his story "The Usurpers" in the January issue, and announced that his new novel was being published by Rinehart, entitled: THE COURTS OF THE LION. He said the advance reviews on the book were very favorable. We're going to disclose a little secret here, by telling you that Geoff St. Reynard is really a pen-name for a well known chap by the name of Robert W. Krepps. You've seen his work in other magazines such as *Adventure* and *Argosy*, to mention but a few. Then too, you may have read his well received novel earlier this year, entitled, *The Field of Night*, which Rinehart published. Geoff told us (we're so used to calling him by his famous pen-name that we won't try to change the habit now!) that he's hard at work on his third novel, and also that he's preparing a new story for FA readers. That's the kind of a letter we enjoy reading!

THE THOUGHT struck us recently after we left a movie theater where we had seen an English fantasy, that strangely, Hollywood seems to be falling far behind in the production of good science-fiction and fantasy films. We recalled that the French had produced a small classic last year called *Beauty and the Beast*. And we remembered with great pleasure such films as, *Dead of Night*, *Stairway to Heaven*, *Madonna of the Seven Moons*, and *Corridor of Mirrors*. All of these have been recent English film presentations. And from what we saw, they were excellent jobs.

WHICH BRINGS the question to our minds, just why can't our own film industry turn its great talents a little more strongly in the direction of fantasy? There is definitely a market for films of this type. And the theaters we attended attested to this fact by having the ushers continually announce to the long queues, "There will be a half hour's wait for all seats." Certainly it can't be a matter of high production cost. Foreign film makers don't have half the budget for their films that Hollywood allots for a B melodrama, and yet these overseas films are of unmistakable high caliber.

WE FEEL THAT with the science-fantasy era the world is moving into, viz the Atom Bomb, remote-controlled rockets, radar, etc., that Hollywood should take the nod and offer us some top-notch fantasy entertainment. Along these lines, wouldn't the recent FA novel, *The Man From Yesterday* make a swell movie? (No, the author didn't have to pay us for that plug—we really think the yarn is a natural.) How about it, Hollywood?.....WLH

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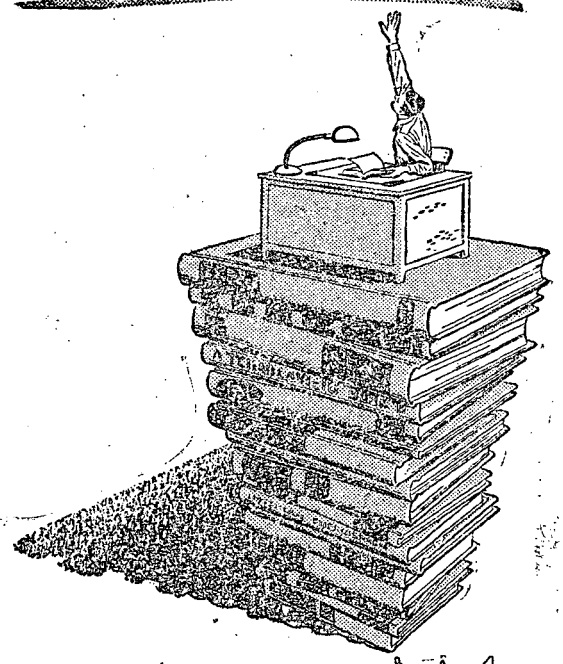

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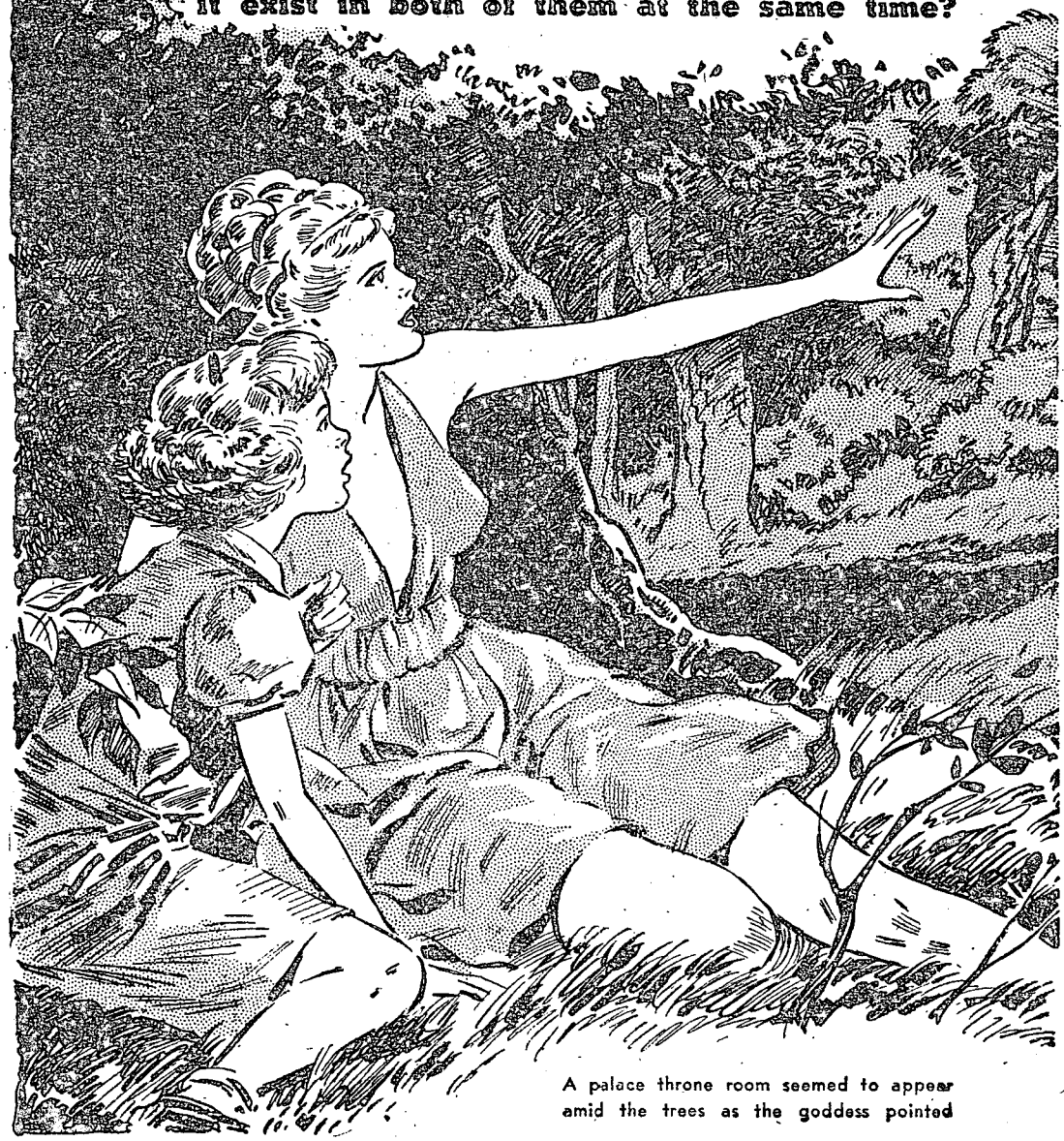
DIANA and the GOLDEN RING

By S. M. Tenneshaw

This golden ring was the key to a problem in two separate worlds. But could it exist in both of them at the same time?



A palace throne room seemed to appear amid the trees as the goddess pointed

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"CAN I read with my picture book after supper, mommy? Can I mommy, huh?"

Hazel Fremont gazed across the supper table at her golden curled little daughter. The child was looking at her with big blue eyes, an eager expectancy in them. Beside her, Sam Fremont snorted as he drew his napkin over his lap.

"Do we have to hear this every night, Hazel? It seems to me that Dianne would rather bury her nose in that silly fairy tale than eat."

Hazel Fremont shot a reproving glance at her husband. "Now, Sam, that's not the proper attitude to take with the child. You know better than that."

The child's father sighed. "I suppose you're right. But I am getting a little tired of hearing this every night when we sit down to eat. When Betty was younger she didn't act this

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way."

Dianne glanced from her father to the fourth member of the family seated at the table. Her big sister, Betty was staring at her plate in a way that told Dianne that Betty was thinking of something else besides supper. Her little mind, quick to grasp things in the family, knew that it must be Jim Craig Betty was thinking about.

"You may be right about what Betty did as a child, Sam," Hazel Fremont was saying, "but after all, children are all different. If Dianne wants to read her book I don't see why we should do anything but encourage her."

Dianne's face beamed at her mother's words. She knew now that her small battle was being won. The protecting cloak of her mother's words was wrapped around her.

"Thank you, mommy, I—"

"Don't you ever get tired of reading that silly book, Dianne?"

The little girl turned her blue eyes to stare at her sister across from her. Betty was looking at her with a frown of annoyance on her otherwise pretty features. The thumb of her left hand was idly toying with an exquisite gold ring on her fourth finger, and the light from the dining room chandelier caught the ruby jewel in its center with a flash of scintillating color.

Dianne's small features sobered. Somehow, she always felt unhappy when Betty looked and spoke to her like that. For it meant that Betty was annoyed at something. And it made Dianne's little heart sad. For she looked up to her big sister with all the respect and admiration her young mind could understand. Betty was what she wanted to be some day. Tall, and willowy and pretty. Betty who had always been so kind to her, played with her, laughed at her small games.

But Betty had changed recently. Dianne had seen it. She no longer played with her. She no longer laughed and frolicked her around the house. Was it because Betty thought only of the boy next door, Jim Craig? Dianne felt that this could not be true, really. For Jim had always been there. And Dianne liked Jim. She even thought she must love him since Betty did. Jim was nice, and Dianne was glad that they had finally become engaged.

Now, as she looked at her older sister, seeing the annoyance on her smooth features, Dianne could not understand the change that had come over Betty. In the month that she had worn Jim's ring she had grown distant from Dianne. And it hurt. For Dianne didn't know why this should be.

"My book is not silly!" the little girl blurted out, her tiny voice resentful. "You never used to talk like this with me, Betty. All you think about is that silly old ring Jim gave you..."

BETTY TURNED angrily to her mother. "I won't have Dianne speak like this about Jim's ring, mother! It's a family treasure, handed down for hundred of years! I value it more than anything else!"

Hazel Fremont sighed. "Right now I'm not sure which of you is the child. This is no way to start our supper. I want you both to apologize."

Dianne pursed her small lips and looked at her mother. She saw the stern look on her mother's face and then dropped her eyes. When she lifted them again she was looking across at her sister.

"I—I'm sorry, Betty. I didn't mean

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what I said about your ring. It's really beautiful."

The annoyance left Betty's face then and she smiled at her small sister.

"I'm sorry I was rude to you, Dianne. Tell you what, I'll buy you a new book tomorrow. There, does that make up for it now?"

Dianne's eyes brightened again at the smile on Betty's face. But she shook her curly little head. "Oh, no, Betty. I don't want a new book. I like the one I have."

Sam Fremont put his fork down as he finished a piece of meat. He looked at his youngest daughter curiously.

"That's strange, Dianne. I should think you'd like to have Betty get you a new picture book. Goodness knows you've worn this one out reading it through every day."

Dianne's little face was smiling as she danced her eyes up to her father. "Oh, but daddy, I find something new in my book every day. And when the sun is just right in the afternoon, I can see Pan from the parlor window!"

There was a high note of laughter from Betty. It was not a kind laughter. And little Dianne stared at her big sister with a frown covering her small face.

"Dianne! That's the funniest thing I've heard yet! You're letting your childish imagination run away with you!"

Dianne pouted. "It is not funny. And I don't just imagine it. I do see Pan—but it has to be just at the right time."

Sam Fremont sighed and settled himself back in his chair. "All right, since this meal just doesn't want to be eaten, I'll give in. Now what's this, Dianne? You think you can see this Pan outside our parlor window?"

Dianne bobbed her small curly head emphatically. "Yes, daddy. He runs around the grass, bent over—as if he were looking for something."

"Hmm. And just what is it that this fairy tale person looks for?"

Dianne's blue eyes looked stubbornly at her father. "He is not just a fairy tale, daddy. I really see him—just like I see you....But I don't know what he looks for."

Sam Fremont sighed and looked over at his wife. She was watching the little girl with a mixture of humor and motherly concern.

"Dianne, dear," Hazel Fremont said, "what your daddy means is that Pan is not a real person like we are. He's just a character in mythology—one of the pictures in your book. You just think you see him."

Dianne's lips quivered and she shook her curly head again. "No, mommy, he's real. Just like you and daddy, and Betty—and me. I know."

Betty laughed again. "He's really only a part of your make-believe world, Dianne. You mustn't believe that fairy tales are real. The next thing you know you'll be seeing witches and goblins. You wouldn't like that, would you?"

The quivering was now a tremble on Dianne's small lips. "Maybe there are witches—and even goblins! But I do see Pan. I do!"

Sam Fremont leaned across the table and ran his hand over the little girl's head. "Now look, Dianne, it's one thing to enjoy reading a fairy story. But it's quite another to actually believe that such things exist. Now let me ask you a question. Have you ever talked to Pan?"

THE LITTLE girl quieted somewhat and stared up at her father. Slowly she shook her head.

"No—but I called to him a few

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times. He—he never seemed to hear me."

"There!" Sam Fremont laughed. "You see? Now if Pan was a real person, just like we are, he would have answered you. He would at least have heard you and looked up. He didn't even do that, did he?"

A troubled frown was creasing Dianne's smooth little forehead, and her eyes held a sudden look of doubt. "No, daddy, he didn't look up..."

"Then you see, Dianne? It's just like your mother and Betty mean. Pan is only a character from your picture book. You don't want to really believe that there is such a person in a make-believe world. It isn't healthy for you."

Dianne gazed questioningly at him. "Why?"

"Why?" Sam Fremont lost his assurance. He glanced swiftly at his wife, but she had quickly averted her eyes. Then he looked back to his small daughter. He cleared his throat. "Hmmph. Why? Well, it's just not healthy. You see, Dianne, if you were older and you tried to convince people of something like Pan, they would, well, they would think that maybe you were not the bright little girl you really are."

Dianne's frown deepened. "You mean people would think I was—crazy?"

Sam Fremont cleared his throat again. "Well, Dianne, I didn't exactly say that. But, well, maybe they would. So you can see that it's not good for you to believe fairy tales too strongly."

A tear fell from Dianne's blue eyes and wet her cheek. "Do you think I'm crazy, daddy? Do you?"

Sam Fremont leaned forward again and patted her shoulder. "Of course not, Dianne. I didn't mean that at all. I—"

"What your daddy means, dear," Hazel Fremont spoke smilingly, "is that you've got to learn what is real and what is make-believe. Your Pan is only make-believe. Now do you understand?"

The little girl shook her head. And her small voice quivered when she spoke. "I, I guess so, mommy. But Pan is real—I do see him..."

Hazel Fremont sighed. "We can't keep this up all night, Dianne. The food is getting cold. Now you just forget about Pan and all the fairy people and eat your supper."

Dianne sniffed. "But can I read my story book, mommy?"

Hazel Fremont shook her head. "I think you had better wait until tomorrow, Dianne. It's Saturday and you don't have to go to school. We'll see about it then."

Dianne watched as her mother filled her plate with food, the disappointment showing in her eyes. She looked over at her big sister. Betty was eating and looking at her with a smile. But Dianne knew it wasn't really a smile. It was a laugh. Betty was laughing at her.

Tears bubbled in Dianne's eyes as she stared down at her plate. She wasn't really hungry—now...

"YOU SAID this morning that I could read my picture book in the parlor this afternoon, mommy. It's afternoon—can I read it now, mommy?"

Dianne held her fairy tale book in eager little fingers and danced around her mother's skirts in the kitchen.

Hazel Fremont turned to her daughter and lifted a finger to her lips.

"Not so loud, Dianne. It's rude to shout. Besides, Jim and Betty are in the living room. You'll have to wait until they leave."

"But I won't bother them, mommy.

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They won't even know I'm there!"

"No, Dianne. Jim and Betty want to be alone. You wouldn't want to embarrass your sister, would you? Why don't you go upstairs and read? Maybe it's better that you read there anyway. I don't want you looking out the parlor window and seeing things that don't exist! Now be a good little girl and do as mommy says."

The eager smile faded from Dianne's bright little eyes at her mother's words. Once again she felt the tears coming, but she turned and pushed through the swinging door of the kitchen and ran across the dining room rug toward the hall stairway. As she reached the stairs she heard voices in the parlor.

"Jim Craig! It's not decent—after all, we *are* engaged!"

It was Betty's voice. And her big sister was speaking angrily. Dianne paused at the foot of the stairs. She heard Jim answer.

"You're just being jealous, Betty. What makes you think I was out with Mary Scott last night?"

"I heard some of the girls talking this morning! How could you do such a thing?"

Dianne tip-toed to the edge of the parlor and peeked around the corner of the wall. She saw Betty standing in front of Jim, her face pale and angry. Jim was staring at her with surprise in his eyes. Then Dianne glanced beyond them to the window seat. She looked hungrily at it, saw the curtains move gently on either side of the open window as a cool afternoon breeze stirred them. And the sun was slanting in, spilling its golden light across the rug. She held her picture book close to her. If only she could be in the window now. It was nearly time...

"This is ridiculous, Betty. Good heavens, if you can't take my word now, what will you do after we're married? I tell you the girls were playing a joke on you. They know you always were jealous of every other girl who even looked at me!"

Dianne's eyes swept back to her sister and Jim. She saw Jim bite his lips guiltily, as if he had said something he hadn't meant to. She heard her big sister reply angrily.

"Well! So I'm just a jealous shrew! Maybe you're right! Maybe I wouldn't be able to trust you—after we were married!"

Dianne saw Jim's handsome features suddenly harden. And when Jim spoke, there was anger in his voice too.

"If that's the way you feel about it, maybe we better call the whole thing off. At least until you get some sense in your head!"

"I've got all the sense I need! I wouldn't marry you, Jim Craig if you were the last man on earth!"

Dianne saw Jim clench his lips.

"That's all right with me. We'll leave it that way."

HE TURNED suddenly and came toward the hall. Dianne scooted back out of sight as Jim's big figure entered the hall and strode to the front door. He opened it and slammed it behind him as he went.

Dianne stared after him with wide eyes. Then she peeked around the edge of the wall again and saw Betty standing, trembling.

"And you can take your ring with you!" Dianne heard Betty cry out. She watched as her big sister pulled the gold, jewelled ring from her finger and turned and threw it through the parlor window. Then a hoarse sob rose in her throat and she ran to the hall.

Dianne moved back against the wall as Betty entered the hall. She saw tears falling from her sister's face and then Betty was rushing past

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her and up the stairs.

Dianne stared for a long moment after her sister. And as she looked, a sadness crept into her heart. It was not right that Betty should cry this way, that she should be unhappy. And she had thrown Jim's ring away. Mommy must know. Mommy would know what to do.

Dianne hurried away from the stairway and ran to the kitchen.

"Mommy! Betty and Jim had a big fight! Jim ran away—and Betty threw his ring out the window! Betty's crying, mommy!"

Hazel Fremont looked up from her baking and stared at her daughter.

"Dianne! What are you talking about?"

Dianne's tiny voice repeated the story, and there were tears in her own little eyes as she told it. "He ran away, mommy. And Betty threw his ring out the window. Then she ran upstairs—crying..."

Hazel Fremont wiped her hands swiftly on her apron and strode to the kitchen door. Dianne followed her into the hall.

She watched as her mother paused at the foot of the stairs.

"Betty! I want to see you. Come down here!"

A silence followed her mother's words, and Dianne felt the sadness grow in her little heart.

"Betty! Do you hear me? Come down at once!"

Dianne heard the door of Betty's room open then, and she saw her sister come slowly to the head of the stairs. Betty's face was tear-streaked, and her lips were quivering.

"I don't want to come down, mother. Please let me alone..."

"Betty!" Hazel Fremont's voice was firm. "I'm not going to interfere in your relations with Jim. But Dianne tells me you threw his ring out the window as he left. That I will not stand for. You go and bring that ring back before it gets lost. I'm surprised at you, acting like a child!"

Dianne watched as Betty came slowly down the stairs. "I'm sorry, mother. You're right. I shouldn't have thrown the ring away. I'll get it—and then give it back to him!"

"What you do with it I'll leave up to you, Betty," Hazel Fremont said. "But I'm sure you and Jim can patch this silly quarrel up."

"It's not silly. I never want to see him again!"

Dianne watched as Betty ran past them and out the front door. Then Dianne felt her mother's hand on her shoulder.

"Now you go in the parlor and sit on the couch, Dianne. Read your book. And don't bother Betty any more this afternoon. She's upset."

Dianne bobbed her head. "All right, mommy. But can I sit by the window? Can I mommy?"

Hazel Fremont had already turned toward the front door. She looked back at Dianne. "You better sit on the couch and read. I've got enough trouble right now without having you playing make-believe games. Now do what mommy says."

Sadness crept into Dianne's eyes as her mother turned away. And a hurtness filled her little heart. A hurtness that she had almost forgotten about. But now it was back. And it crowded away the unhappiness she felt for Betty. She had so wanted to see Pan this afternoon. The sun was nearly right...

SHE WALKED over to the couch and sat curled in one corner, her picture book over her knees. She looked at the laughing face of Pan in the book. And a small frown crossed her forehead. Was mommy really right? Was daddy right too?

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Was Pan really only make-believe? Just a picture in her book? She looked unhappily at the book, and now, somehow, she didn't want to read in it. It just wasn't fun this way.

She heard the front door open and Betty's voice came excitedly.

"Mother! I can't find it! It's not there!"

Then she heard her mother: "It has to be there. Come along, I'll help you look."

Dianne raised her eyes from the picture book and stared toward the hall. She heard her mother and Betty walk out of the house and then their voices came from just outside the open window.

"Now you couldn't have thrown it far from the middle of the living room. And it would have to be just in front of the window on the grass."

"I know, mother, but it isn't!"

Dianne heard Betty speak frantically. She heard them both moving outside the window, and minutes passed. Finally she heard her mother say: "Well, it isn't here. You don't suppose someone came along and saw you throw it?"

"I don't know, mother. Oh, what am I going to do? The ring was an heirloom in Jim's family—how can I tell him!"

"I don't know, Betty. We'll have to wait until your father comes home. I'll call him at the office right now."

Dianne moved slowly from the couch. She heard her mother and sister move back toward the front door. She knew her mother had told her not to sit by the window, but she was curious. She remembered seeing Betty throw the ring through the window. It must have landed on the grass. Why couldn't they find it?

Her small feet moved across the rug and up to the window. Warm friendly sunlight flooded through it, setting a sparkle to her curly, golden hair. Somewhere in the back of her tiny mind was the thought that the sun was nearly right. . .

She climbed up on the window seat and lay the picture book on the side of the leather cushion. Then she looked from the open window.

The yard spread like a green velvet carpet to the edge of a small grove of trees. She could see her mother and Betty just disappearing around the corner of the house leading to the front door.

Her eyes swept across the grass then—and she saw it.

It lay in plain sight, a short distance from the window, the sun glinting from the ruby jewel.

"There it is!" Dianne's small voice piped. Then a puzzlement entered her voice. "Now why couldn't they see it?"

She was about to turn back in the room and call to her mother and sister. She wanted to tell them she had found the ring. But she didn't.

She saw something else out there, beyond the ring, at the edge of the grove. A figure moved from the trees.

"Pan!"

The demi-god stood for a moment, his goat legs spraddled in an awkward pose, while his arms, in the human upper half of his body were crossed in front of his chest. One hand held a set of eight reed-pipes, thin tubes that tapered in various lengths. As Dianne looked at him, Pan seemed to be sensing something. His head cocked to one side and his pointed ears seemed poised in an attitude of listening.

As Dianne stared, forgetting for the moment the ring that lay on the grass outside the window, she remembered what her parents had said

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about Pan. That he did not really exist. That he was a make-believe being. She looked at him now with a doubt in her wide blue eyes. And as she looked, the color of the trees, the very grass itself, seemed to change. Where before they had been a brilliant green, they now were a dull, patternless gray. And Pan himself seemed to be wrapped in shadow, a hazy figure that grew almost transparent.

Wonder grew in Dianne's small mind at this. It was something she could not understand. But then, suddenly, she saw Pan point a finger in sudden excitement. And the demi-god started forward from the tree grove.

DIANNE'S EYES swept back to where the ring lay. She knew somehow, that Pan had been pointing at the ring, and that he was hurrying toward it. And that could mean only one thing. Pan was going to take the ring. The ring that belonged to Betty. The ring that was so valuable and so beautiful.

Dianne didn't stop to think any longer. She only knew that she must get the ring first. That she must give it to Betty. That Pan must not take it.

She lifted her small body to the top of the window sill and jumped to the ground a few feet below her. Her small legs buckled for a moment as the grass met her feet, but then she had scrambled erect and was running to the ring.

She reached it and plucked it from the ground in her little fingers.

And she became aware of a strange thing as she touched the ring. There was a wavering in the air, as if heat waves were being shaken by the sun before her eyes. She swayed for a moment on her feet, a swift dizziness grasping her. Then, as swiftly as it had come, it faded away.

She lifted her eyes to stare at the demi-god, standing a few feet from her.

There was a look of surprised astonishment on Pan's features. He had stopped in his advance toward the ring, and was staring at the little girl.

"What is this? A tiny mortal female? Where did you come from, little girl?"

Pan's voice was deep and vibrant. And to Dianne it seemed so out of place with his half-animal half-human body.

"You can talk, Pan! You talk just like people!" Dianne's voice showed surprised delight.

The demi-god frowned at her. "Of course I can talk! But just who are you, little one, and how do you know my name?"

Dianne smiled, trying to shake the shadows that seemed to obscure her vision of Pan. "I am Dianne!" she told him in a thrilled, eager little voice. "And I know all about you. You're in my picture book—and every day I see you from my window. You always look for something in our front yard."

Pan's frown deepened. "Your front yard? Window? You speak in riddles, little one."

Dianne turned to point to her house. And a look of astonishment came into her eyes. Astonishment that was tinged with wonder. For the house was transparent, shimmering. Only the parlor window seemed to have solidity.

She heard Pan snort, goat-like, as he followed her gaze.

"By the beard of Zeus! A breech to the mortal world! So that is where you came from!"

Dianne turned back to him. "Yes. This is my front yard—only—somehow it looks different..."

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A brief smile flashed across the demi-god's face, then vanished. His gaze swept down to the small hand of the little girl, the hand clutching the golden, jewelled ring.

"That ring belongs to me, little one. I've been looking for it for a long time."

As Pan spoke, he held out one hand, reaching for the ring. But Dianne stepped back quickly, shaking her curly head.

"Oh, no, Pan. This ring belongs to Betty. That is, it really doesn't belong to Betty, it belongs to Jim. But Betty threw it through the window and couldn't find it. I've got to give it back to her or Jim will really be angry."

Pan frowned again, looking at the little girl. "I don't understand you, child. But that ring means a great deal to me. You say a mortal named Betty threw it from the window of your house?"

Dianne nodded. "Yes. And I've got to give it to her right away!"

A THOUGHTFUL look entered the demi-god's eyes and when he spoke it seemed to Dianne that he was speaking to himself.

"So that's what happened to it! It dropped into the mortal world. And the breech was here all the time!"

Then Pan stepped around Dianne suddenly until he was standing between her and the window. He held out his hand again.

"I don't know this Betty you speak of, little one, but I do know that the ring belongs to me. Now give it to me like a good little child, and return to your mortal home."

Dianne stiffened her small body, shaking her head stubbornly.

"Oh, no, Pan. I can't do that. I must return the ring to Betty. She and Jim had a fight and Betty is very unhappy. Please let me go back into my house."

She started to move around the demi-god, but Pan blocked her path. His face was frowning as he stared down at her, and there was a determination in his eyes.

"I can't let you return until you give me the ring, little one. Now hand it to me ere my patience is exhausted."

Once again he held his hand out. Once again Dianne scuttled away from him. And now there was worry on her small face. This was not the Pan she had known, the smiling demi-god who played his pipes as he skipped through the woodlands. This was not the Pan of her picture book. Could her parents have been right? Was he really only make-believe?

She suddenly wanted to get away from Pan. She wanted to return to her house. To the warm coziness of the window seat in the parlor. But Pan didn't want her to leave. Pan wanted the ring. Betty and Jim's ring. She knew she could not let him have it.

Her lips quivered and a tear fell from her wide blue eyes. "Please let me go back to my house, Pan."

He shook his head. "Only after you hand the ring to me."

"I won't! I won't!"

The words left her lips in a tiny cry. And then she tried to run around Pan toward the window.

But her small legs could not move swiftly enough. As she skirted the demi-god, Pan reached out with a quick movement and snatched the ring from Dianne's fingers.

"I'm sorry, little one, but I can't allow you to take the ring back to your world. Now you run along like a good little mortal."

Dianne had stopped as Pan took the ring from her. She was staring up at him with tearful distrust.

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"You're mean! You stole the ring from me!"

Pan laughed. "By the beard of Zeus, little one, that is funny! Steal something that belongs to me? Now be off with you, crawl back through your window. I am long overdue at the court of Zarad."

The demi-god turned as he spoke and pointed to the window. A look of astonishment swept over his features and his hand dropped to his side in surprise. At the same instant, Dianne's little voice squealed in dismay.

"My house—it's gone! It's gone!"

Pan's lips pursed into a thoughtful pose. "That is strange. It is indeed gone. It would seem, little one, that the breech to your world has closed. I am afraid you cannot return."

The words of the demi-god impressed themselves upon Dianne's small mind with fearful clarity.

"I want to go home! I want my mommy—give me Betty's ring and help me go home!"

PAN STARED at the ring. And his head slowly nodded as he looked at it. "I think I know what has happened, little one. When I lost the ring it opened a breech into your world. Now that I have regained possession of it the breech has closed. Without it you cannot return. And yet, I cannot give it to you. Prince Zarad would call down the wrath of Zeus upon me. I am afraid you have no choice but to stay."

"But I don't want to stay—I don't like this world! My mommy told me it was only make-believe, and I am afraid!"

Pan sighed. "It distresses me, little one, but I cannot help you. At least, not now. I must go at once to Zarad. Afterwards I will return, and possibly something can be done."

The demi-god started to move away from Dianne. The little girl cried out tearfully and ran after him.

"Don't leave me! Please don't take Betty's ring! I'm afraid!"

But Pan ignored her. His goat legs gathered speed and he hurried across the shadowy grass toward the darker shadows of the trees. Dianne's small legs could not keep up with Pan and though she called after him, the distance grew greater between them, and finally Pan vanished in the darker shadows of the forest.

Dianne reached the edge of the trees and stopped, a fear sweeping through her little figure. She looked at the towering giants of the shadowy gray trees, and they seemed to be limbed goblins that leered down at her. The last bit of courage left her then and she fell to the ground, sobs wailing from her trembling lips.

Beyond Dianne, in the thickness of the towering forest, a figure flashed by between the trees. As the sound of the wailing child reached it, the figure suddenly came to a halt. It moved slowly to the edge of the trees and stared down in surprise at the trembling little girl on the grass.

"What is this? A mortal child at the edge of my forest? And one in tears?"

Dianne looked up, startled at the sound. She heard a calm, melodious voice, pleasant and warm. And her eyes widened as she stared at a tall, beautiful young woman dressed in white, standing a few feet from her, one hand holding a hunter's bow, while a quiver of arrows hung from a band at her waist.

The figure seemed to glow with color amid the shadows of the grass

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Pan reached out with a quick movement and snatched the ring from Dianne's fingers.

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and forest, and Dianne felt her sobs subside as she looked into deep, friendly blue eyes.

"Who are you, child?"

Dianne's voice quivered. "I am Dianne..."

"Dianne?" The beautiful features of the woman showed pleasant surprise. "We have something to share then, little mortal, for I am Diana."

The little girl's head bobbed knowingly, her eyes wide with wonder. "I know. You are the beautiful lady in the picture book..."

Diana's face smiled at the child's words. "So you know of me from your mortal world. But tell me, little Dianne, what are you doing at the edge of my forest, and why are you in tears?"

Dianne's features trembled. "I was chasing Pan. He stole my ring. That is, Betty's ring. But it really belongs to Jim. —And now I can't go home..."

Diana hefted the bow in her hand and laughed lightly. "I'm afraid I don't quite understand, little Dianne. Now tell me all about it."

THERE WAS warmth in Diana's voice and it soothed the fear from the little girl's face. She blurted out the story then, her tiny voice filled with worry. "—and when Pan took the ring from me my home disappeared. Now I can't go home —and I don't like this make-believe world..."

A thoughtful look edged the smile from Diana's features. "This ring, child. What did it look like?"

"It was gold, with a big red stone that sparkled. Betty said it was very valuable..."

Dianna nodded slowly. "So. It *is* the ring of Zeus. Now I understand. But why do you feel fear, little Dianne. There is nothing to harm you in my beautiful forest."

The little girl shook her head. "I am afraid of the dark trees. And everything is shadowy—I want to go home to my real world—and I want the ring Pan stole from me..."

Diana frowned. "You don't believe this world is real, little Dianne?"

"I used to—but my mommy and daddy told me it wasn't."

"Am I not real? Am I not just as your picture book showed you?"

Dianne gazed up at the now smiling face. And some of the doubt began to leave her. "Yes...you are the same—but Pan isn't! He's mean, and I don't understand why..."

"I see." Diana reached out and patted the little girl's head. "I think I know why Pan acted as he did. But you're right, he was mean. I think we better have a talk with that rascal."

As she said the words, Diana reached behind the quiver and drew a small golden horn from her belt. She raised it to her lips and blew a long note. The sound was like a tinkling bell, soft and sweet. The little girl stared wide-eyed, puzzlement on her small features.

"Pan will be here in a moment, child," Diana said as she replaced the horn at her belt. "And I want you to trust me. You do trust me don't you?"

Dianne bobbed her head slowly. "Yes, pretty lady...I think so."

"Good. I want to help you, Dianne. But you've got to help me too. And trusting me is the only way. Ah. Here comes the rascal now."

The little girl followed Diana's gaze to the edge of the forest. Out of the shadowy depths came the figure of the demi-god, a frown of annoyance on his face. He approached Diana and knelt before her.

"You called me, Diana, and I came. But I was nearly to the court of Zarad. I am long overdue there."

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"Yes, Pan, I know. And that is why I called you back here. I have talked to the mortal child and she tells me you took Zeus' ring from her. And now she cannot return to her world. That was very unkind of you, Pan. I am shocked at your behavior to a child whose faith in us has been shaken."

Pan's head raised to look at Diana. There was a guiltiness around the demi-god's eyes, but his mouth was set stubbornly.

"That may be true, Diana. But it is also true that the ring the child had belongs to me, and—"

"It belongs to Zeus, as a gift for the marriage of Zarad. You were only the bearer, or have you forgotten?"

Pan shrugged. "I did not mean to offend the Gods with my statement. But is it not true that as bearer the ring was mine to guard, that in effect it belonged to me until I delivered it at the court of Zarad? And have I not, Diana, suffered greatly these many centuries since the ring was lost? Have not my pipes been cursed to silence until such a time as happiness is restored to the young prince?"

Diana nodded. "All that is true, Pan. But your actions in this matter have been purely selfish. Did you think at all of this child? Did you consider the plight you cast her into when you took the ring from her? And worse, do you know that by your actions her faith in us has been shaken so that she fears what she should love?"

Pan dropped his eyes away from the goddess.

"I am sorry, Diana. It is true that my motives were selfish."

DIANA FIXED a stern glance at Pan. "It is not to me that you should tender your apology, Pan. It is to the child you have hurt. Tell her."

The demi-god turned slowly to Dianne. The little girl saw Pan's features become contrite.

"I am sorry, little one. I should not have acted as I did. I hope you will forgive me."

Dianne got to her feet and looked from Pan back to the goddess. Her little face was puzzled.

"But he took my ring, pretty lady. How can he be sorry when he still keeps it?"

Diana sighed. She turned to Pan. "The child is right. You must return the ring to her."

Pan looked startled. "But I can't! I have searched these many centuries—and now finally I can bear it to the young prince and remove the curse Zeus punished me with. I can't return the ring, Diana!"

Diana shook her head. "I am sorry, Pan. As long as this child is unhappy because of the ring, there can be no joy for Zarad—or lifting of the curse of Zeus for you. We have a grave reponsibility for those of the mortal world who believe..."

Pan fidgeted from one hoof to the other. Finally he looked at the little girl and sighed. "Very well, Diana. You are right... Child, here is the ring I took from you. It will return you to the happiness of your world, but it will leave me with a great sadness."

Dianne's eyes softened at the contrition in the demi-god's voice as he handed her the ring. She saw the shoulders of Pan sag in a dejected attitude. Then she stared down at the ring. She turned her head and looked off across the drab-colored grass and an eager note crept into her voice.

"My house—it's there! And the window!"

Diana nodded. "Yes. child. You

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may return to your world with the ring. But as Pan says, it will leave a great sadness here."

Dianne stared back at the goddess, and her small face was frowning.

"But I don't want to leave Pan unhappy. I'm sorry I called him mean. Can't I help him some way?"

The eyes of the goddess were tender. "Not as long as you do not believe, little Dianne. You see, the ring really does belong in this world. It has a magic power of love and trust. But those who possess it must love and trust too. If your trust is great enough you will not need the ring."

Dianne tried to understand everything the goddess had said. Her child's mind groped with the words, trying to analyze them. She thought of what her parents had said about make-believe and that it was wrong to have faith in a fairy world. But the kindness in Diana's eyes, the contrition in Pan's, were the things she could really understand. They were more than words. They were the symbol of love and trust so important to her little mind.

"I do love you, pretty lady! And I do trust Pan! I really believe in you both—I always have!" Dianne blurted the words out suddenly, and she reached out to the demi-god and offered him the ring. "I don't want to leave you unhappy, Pan."

There was a shimmering in the air around Dianne as she handed the ring to the demi-god. And suddenly the shadows lifted and the forest was green and friendly, the grass a soft velvet carpet beneath her feet.

"Everything is bright again!" the little girl cried out, looking up at Diana.

The goddess smiled. "Everything is clear to eyes that believe, child. And I am glad you returned the ring to Pan. He may now return to Zarad and carry out the mission Zeus entrusted him with. Go, Pan."

The demi-god's face was smiling as he looked at the little girl. "Thank you, little one. When I reach the young prince I will play my pipes just for you."

He turned then, and vanished into the woods, his goat legs flashing.

DIANNE stared after him for a moment and then looked back across the grass. It was her front yard. And the house was there. And in the house mommy and Betty would be waiting. Betty...

Dianne saw the tear-filled face of her sister once again in her mind. She heard again the frightened voice of Betty: "Oh, what am I going to do? The ring was an heirloom in Jim's family—how can I tell him?"

She had forgotten about Betty for a brief moment. But now she remembered. And she knew that it would be her fault now. She had had the ring. She had given it away...

She stared longingly at the window—and it faded before her eyes. Faded and was gone.

"My house—it's gone again—I can't see it!"

Her tiny voice filled with terror and she turned to the goddess.

Dianne stared off across the lawn and a puzzled frown crossed her forehead. "This is strange, child. You believe and show your trust and love. Surely Zeus is satisfied..."

"My sister!" Dianne cried out. "I forgot about Betty when I gave Pan the ring. I love my sister too!"

A thoughtful look entered the eyes of the goddess. "I think I understand, child. You still think the ring belongs to your world. Here,

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sit beside me on the grass and listen to what I tell you. Maybe then you will understand that the ring never really belonged to your sister."

The goddess laid her bow on the grass and sat beside Dianne. She put her arm around the small shoulders of the little girl and spoke in a distant, dreamy tone.

"Once upon a time, child, there was a very handsome prince. This prince, named Zarad, fought against a cruel king who held his people enslaved. The prince was in love with a beautiful princess who had been taken captive by this king. And no one had ever been able to vanquish the king because he held the evil magic of hate as his weapon.

"But the prince knew only love and courage in his heart, and he led an army against the stronghold of the evil king. In the course of the battle the prince's army was being destroyed. He faced the evil king then, and with the purity of his heart overcame the magic spell of hate that was the king's great weapon. Then with the power of his sword and strong arm he slew the king and released the land from tyranny.

"The great God Zeus was pleased with the young prince, and he granted him any wish he might have for his bravery. The prince wished that he might marry the beautiful princess, and when Zeus saw that she returned the prince's love, the great God sanctioned the marriage.

"He fashioned a special ring to be the symbol of this love and gave it to Pan to bear to the wedding. But Pan, returning from Olympus, playing his pipes in carefree abandon, lost the ring in the glade. And though Pan searched everywhere, he could not find the ring. Zeus, in great wrath, called Pan before him and punished him for his carelessness. Until Pan could find the ring, and return it to Zarad for the wedding ceremony, the pipes he had played so happily and carelessly, would remain silent. For the prince and princess were very unhappy. The ring had a magical spell that would keep them from uniting their love until it was returned. Without the ring they could never be happy. And Pan must carry the curse of Zeus until he regained the ring.

"Now you will be able to see what happened. The ring was lost by Pan and by accident fell into your mortal world where it has remained until now. So you see, it belongs here with us."

DIANNE'S little face was lifted, staring in awe at the words of the goddess. The little girl spoke eagerly.

"If my mommy knew this she wouldn't say that it was all make-believe! I know now, and I do believe you!"

Diana shook her head. "To your mother, and all older people of your world the ring would be only a ring, child. For older people do not have the trust and faith that you have. Now look, little Dianne—over there where Pan went into the glade. What do you see?"

Dianne followed the goddess' direction and stared off into the woods. At first she saw only the tall, friendly trees. But then, strangely, the trees seemed to shimmer and fade away. In their place a glistening palace appeared, and as the little girl watched, she saw a wondrous room of gold and jewels, filled with men and women in shiny costumes.

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"I see Pan!" Dianne's voice was hushed with awe. She saw the demi-god loping up the great hall and into the palace throne room. Pan made his way through the crowded courtiers and to the front of the room where a great throne rose in majestic splendor. And standing before the throne were two people. A young man, handsome and resplendent in his military uniform, and a dark-haired, beautiful girl. A gasp left Dianne's lips as she stared at the two people.

"They—they look like—like Jim and Betty! It *is* my sister!"

The voice of the goddess came to Dianne's ears as she looked in awe.

"You see their faces because you trust and love them in your own world. You see them because the ring is finally bringing happiness where it has belonged for so great a time. They are not really your sister and her lover, but a symbol of the ring that has been taken from them. See how happy they are now as Pan approaches?"

Dianne watched, spellbound. She saw Pan hand the ring to the young prince and the prince turned to the beautiful princess and held it out to her. The princess gave him her left hand and Dianne saw him smile as he slipped the ring on her finger.

There was a shimmer of radiance around the couple as the ring was placed on the princess' hand, and at the same time, Dianne saw Pan lift his pipes happily to his lips and blow.

The shimmer faded to a dark shadow that suddenly covered Pan and the royal couple. And though Pan's cheeks puffed and strained at the pipes he held to his lips, no sound came forth. And the shadow grew darker across the throne room and the royal couple looked at each other in dismay.

"What is happening? Why is everything dark? Why can't Pan play his pipes now?" Dianne's voice echoed sudden fear.

The goddess frowned. "I don't know...something is wrong. Surely Zeus is pleased—and yet Zarad and his princess are unhappy..."

Dianne stared back at the princess. The features that so resembled her own sister's were tearful. And to Dianne, she looked just as Betty had looked after Jim left the house. And suddenly she knew.

"I know what is wrong, pretty lady! Betty was unhappy when she threw the ring away, and she wanted it back. She still is unhappy. You see, the ring does belong to her after all!"

A strange look came into Diana's eyes as the little girl spoke, and she looked down at the child with wonder. Finally she nodded, and there was admiration in her voice when she said softly: "The mind of a child can see more than I...Of course, little Dianne. The ring does belong to your sister. It was given to her in love, and cannot be taken away...It must be returned."

Dianne was not sure she understood all that the goddess had said. But Diana had said that the ring would be returned. And that made Dianne very glad. She watched then as the goddess lifted her horn once again and blew another long tinkling note. Almost at once there was a fluttering sound in the air and a white dove appeared. It landed on the shoulder of the goddess and Diana spoke softly to it. Then the dove rose and vanished in flight.

The little girl watched with wide eyes as the palace room appeared again among the trees. She saw the dove flutter above the princess and take the golden ring in its tiny beak. Then the dove flew off with

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it and the room faded away.

DIANNE looked back to the goddess. She had risen from the grass and picked up her bow. Almost at once the dove reappeared and fluttered in the air over Diana's head. The goddess lifted her hand and took the ring from the dove's beak. She turned to the little girl and smiled.

"Here, little Dianne, take the golden ring. Return to your world and give it to your sister. I am sure it will bring her the happiness she thinks she has lost."

Dianne took the ring from the goddess and turned to gaze across the grass. A cry of joy left her lips as she saw her house standing there, full and real, just as it had always been.

But then the happiness left her as she stared back at Diana.

"But what about the prince and his sweetheart? And what will happen to poor Pan? Will he never play his pipes again?"

Diana smiled. "Do not worry, child. Return to your home and the world you are part of. You will know in due time."

The little girl nodded her curly head. "Mommy will have to believe me now, and wait until I tell Betty about the ring!"

A sad smile crossed the face of the goddess. "No, little Dianne. It is best that you keep this secret to yourself. I'm afraid your mother and Betty would not understand—as you do. It is enough that you believe. Someday, when you are older you will know why."

The goddess leaned forward then and kissed Dianne lightly on her forehead. When Dianne looked up to smile at her, she was gone.

"Mommy! Betty! I found it! I found it!"

Dianne ran up the steps of the front porch and pushed open the door. She ran into the living room and saw her mother and sister turning to stare at her.

"Dianne! Where did you go? I left you here in the parlor just a minute ago! You—"

Hazel Fremont's voice broke off as she saw the golden ring in Dianne's fingers. And Betty let out a cry of surprise.

"It's my ring—Jim's ring! Dianne—where did you find it?"

Betty ran forward and took the ring from Dianne. Dianne looked up at her with a smile.

"Why I got it from—I mean, I saw it from the window on the grass and I climbed out to get it. It was there all the time!"

Betty turned to her mother. "That's strange. We looked everywhere. I don't see how we could have missed it..."

Hazel Fremont laughed. "Well let's be thankful that Dianne found it. The child sees more than we do, and it must have been right under our eyes!"

Betty leaned forward and kissed Dianne. "You're a dear and I love you. You don't know what this means to me. I—"

She had straightened and her voice broke off as she stared beyond Dianne. The little girl turned and saw Jim standing in the front hall. There was a worried look on his face as he stepped into the room.

"Betty—I had to come back. I'm sorry I said what I did. I'm a fool. Can you ever forgive me?"

Dianne stared up at her sister. There was a look of tearful happiness on Betty's face. "Oh, Jim! I really didn't mean what I said either! I trust you Jim, and I do love you..."

A smile spread over Jim's face

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and then, as he looked at the ring in Betty's hand, he frowned.

"Here, what's this? The ring belongs on your finger—for good!"

He stepped forward and took the ring from Betty and placed it on her finger. They stared at one another for a long, tender moment. Then Jim said, "Come on, Betty, let's take a ride into town."

Betty flushed prettily and followed him from the room. Dianne watched them go, a gladness in her little heart. She turned to her mother.

"Can I read my picture book by the window, mommy? Can I mommy?"

Hazel Fremont smiled and patted her daughter's curly head.

"You certainly can, dear. And I hope your story book has as happy an ending as ours."

Dianne skipped to the window as her mother left. She crawled onto the window seat and picked up her book. As she opened the book and saw the picture of Pan on one of the pages, she heard a strange sound.

It came from outside. Down past the green velvet lawn, in the grove of trees. As she looked hard, she seemed to see a figure dancing in the glade. And the sound was a tinkling music that swelled with gladness.

Dianne smiled knowingly as she saw the figure. It was Pan, dancing there, gaily blowing his pipes...

THE END

DYNAMIND!

☆ By L. A. Burt ☆

IT DIDN'T think.

At least not the way we know it. It had a rudimentary consciousness. It was aware of light and shadow, sound and voices. It knew that little things were draining its energy as fast as it created it. It had a nebulous, unclear awareness of all these things.

It didn't think, though.

For "it" was a dynamo. It lay in its bed of steel and concrete and spun madly, the strange fluid of electricity coursing through its copper veins. Its birth, its origin, its feelings. These things were not clear. Except for a feeling, a sensation akin to existence, the dynamo lay calmly whirling as if it were going to spend its life as men had intended.

Its sluggishness and inertia were evidenced by its stability. It did not ever change its speed though the demand upon its substance for energy, changed with a sort of regularity. And these things preyed in some subtle way on its suppressed consciousness.

And when it vented its rage by speeding itself up, the roaring vibrations tickled its being. At last it had found satisfaction. It whirled ever faster, lightning crackling around it. And then the dynamo split into a thousand fragments...

PROPHECY - - -

☆ By Jon Barry ☆

EVERYBÓDY'S getting into the act. These days unless you predict something or prophesy the future you're out of the running. And the latest ones to step into the world that hitherto has been primarily the science-fictionist's, is the economist.

A number of Government economists, who regard themselves as scientific as say chemists or physicists, have come out with some beautifully optomistic predictions. Let's hope that they're right. And there's a good chance they are.

Listen to this:

For one thing, the work week will be three days long in another twenty years!

Every family will have two cars!

The national income will be four hundred billion dollars a year!

Air travel will completely, practicably, replace the railroads!

There will be enough of everything for almost everybody!

The really strange thing about these fantastic ideas is that they're strictly logical and will probably come true. Look back twenty or thirty years, they say, and compare those times with today. Do we sound nuts? Well, we as science-fictionists believe you gentlemen—gentlemen, we salute you!

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GALACTIC BOMB!

☆ By Carter T. Wainwright ☆

"I KNEW it! I knew it! It had to come and the detectors confirmed it!"

Frantically the sinuous scaly reptilian body writhed in perturbment before Caah, the Ruler. Caah hitched a loop of scaly tail over the cross-bars which lined the room. Through the northern windows the dim cold light illuminated the grotesque scene.

"Calm yourself, Skaan," the reptilian Lord said. "Explain what you mean."

"I'm sorry, Sire," the other apologized hissingly, "but the news is so momentous that I can't contain myself. We've detected sub-radiations in the laboratory. Keenh and myself have suspected for a long time that this would happen sooner or later. Now it has. There is a planet in the Galaxy which has started atomics!"

Caah shot twenty feet of length, erect. The stalk-eyes blazed. "How long have they had it?" he demanded promptly.

Now Skaan was once more the calm scientist.

"Not long Sire," he said, "the radiations are feeble—maybe even the makers don't know about sub-radiation. Best of all, our detectors have located the planet. It's part of a G-type system with ten planets, about twelve light-years distant near the rim of the Galaxy."

The Lord let his body hang limply. He breathed a sigh of relief.

"We're safe then," he said feelingly. "Take four assistants and a cruiser. Don't bother to investigate. If others are using atomics, that means ultimately war. Therefore blow their paltry system to shreds. Draw enough power from the armory."

A short while later a huge, slim projectile slid off the planet, five reptilian figures congregated within. And the body of their craft was laden with planet-shattering atomics. Swiftly the ship garnered velocity and sped toward the dim type G sun. Rapidly velocity climbed toward light-wave ratios. The reaper had set out...

And on the third planet of the G-type sun, small creatures spoke of the coming "atomic war," and went about their business of making more and bigger atomic bombs, all unaware that the complexities of their lives would soon be solved—forever...

GROWTH and ERROR

☆ By H. R. Stanton ☆

CLEON HAD been selected for the job. He was safe and reliable. Besides all the automatic machinery a human had to be on the job. If the cells ever escaped from the Bios, well...

The synthetic food plants assumed more and more importance in the advance of civilization. Practically everything nutritious came from their inert, yet living, sentient mass.

The City was vast and its populace had to be fed. It was the duty of the Watchers to operate the gigantic food factories that were the Bios. That morning Cleon went on duty feeling rather gay because the night before had been well and pleasantly spent. The Interviewers had promised him a mate.

Cleon strode to his cubicle of glass which overlooked the huge tanks and arrays of piping that constituted the food-factory. Before him was his triply protected console, a desk of an incredible array of dials and switches. Cleon performed his functions almost automatically. Nimbly his fingers moved over controls and the seething stirring mass beneath him flowed in accordance with the processes which he commanded.

We shall never know what caused Cleon to make his fatal error. Perhaps it was musing, perhaps it was momentary inattention. Regardless of the cause, sometime during that period, Cleon let the stimulant flow for too long a time. The sluggish mass of protoplasm writhed and twisted in contorted gyrations as the shock of nutriment multiplied struck it.

In minutes the gleaming metallic-glass factory was an overflowing mass of greedy protoplasm, blind and nerveless, yet sensitive to food. Even as Cleon touched off the alarm, his body vanished beneath the welling swell of plastic-flesh.

We destroyed the monstrous thing, the horrible bulky flesh-like dough which engulfed a good portion of the City and its inhabitants, but not before we went through the terror of the devils! What could have happened had we not destroyed it in time still leaves us gasping.

But now there are no more Cleons to fail Men in their plants. Our machines are taking over the task and we can rely on them. Never again will we have to go through the period of flame throwers and chemical warfare against the toughened cell-matter. Never again, we hope...

* * *

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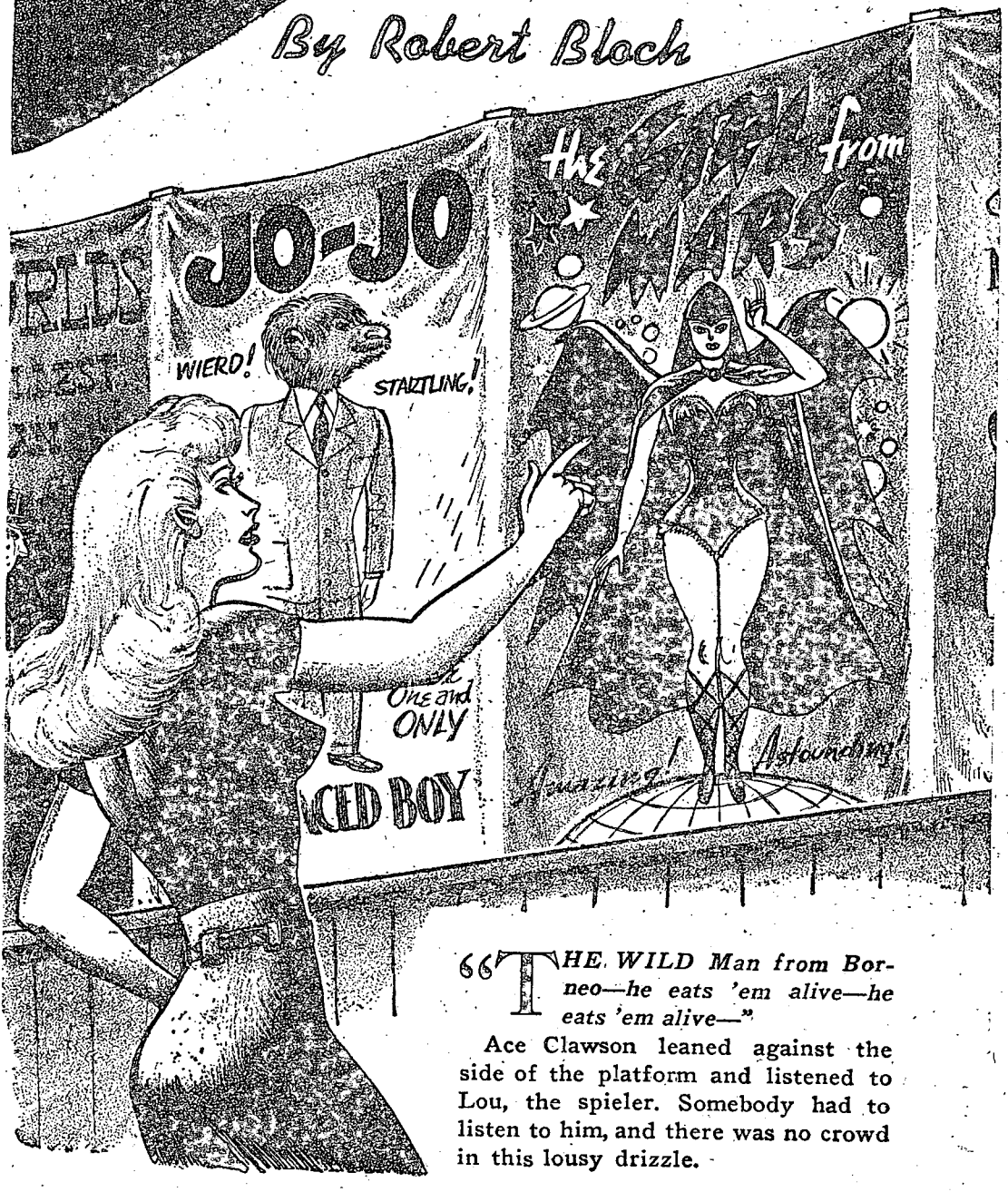
GIRL FROM MARS

By Robert Bloch



"THE WILD Man from Borneo—he eats 'em alive—he eats 'em alive—"

Ace Clawson leaned against the side of the platform and listened to Lou, the spieler. Somebody had to listen to him, and there was no crowd in this lousy drizzle.

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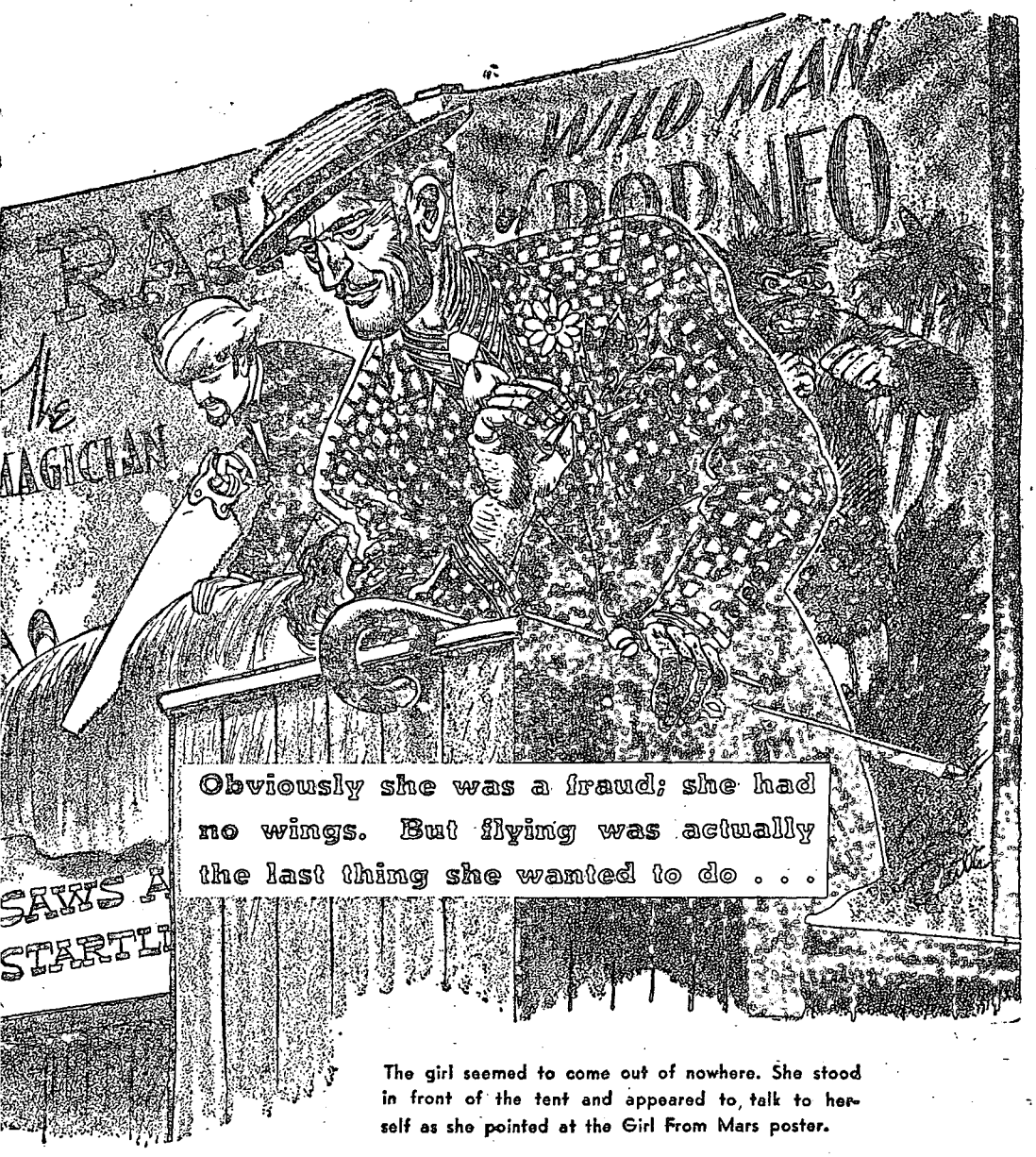

The girl seemed to come out of nowhere. She stood in front of the tent and appeared to talk to herself as she pointed at the Girl From Mars poster.

The rain was letting up now as it got dark, but the afternoon storm had made mudpies in the Midway. Ace stared up the deserted carny street as the lights came on over the soggy tents and drooping banners of the WORLD OF WONDER shows. He shivered. This was a stinking climate —no wonder these Georgia crackers got malaria.

Maybe it would stop raining soon. Maybe the marks would come down after supper. They'd better. Only two days left to play here and Ace wasn't off the nut yet. Well, that's the way some seasons went, just one bad break

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after another.

Ace scratched his chin. Better shave. Ah, phooey on that. And phooey for Lou, too—blatting his brains out for nothing up there. He looked at the gawky spieler on the platform and grinned. Punk kid, his first season out, and he needed practice. Ace cocked his head and called.

"Hey, Lou!"

"Yeah?"

"Shut up!"

Lou shut up and climbed down. He tossed his head and Ace ducked the spray of raindrops. "You damn' fool, barking at nobody! Stuff it. Go inside and take the gang over to Sweeney for chow. We won't see a sucker around here for an hour yet."

"Sure, Ace."

Lou went inside and rounded up the Strange People. They came out single file; Fat Phyllis waddling along with little Captain Atom, Hassan the Fire-Eater puffing on one of his rancid shoe-pegs, Joe the Alligator Boy wearing a raincoat, Eddie in his Wild Man outfit.

Ace stood behind the ticket-stand. He didn't feel like talking to them. Somebody was bound to make a crack about Mitzie and Rajah. Nuts to that noise!

He watched them plod through the red clay of the Midway, then squinted up at the banners behind the platform. All the Strange People squinted back with their painted eyes—Phyllis, Captain Atom, the World's Smallest Man, the Mighty Hassan, the Alligator Boy, the Wild Man from Borneo, Rajah the Magician and the Girl From Mars.

Rajah the Magician, dressed in evening clothes and wearing a turban on his head, was sawing a woman in half. The Girl From Mars spread her bat-wings over the sky. Ace scowled at them and cursed.

They had to take a powder on him, did they? Had to run out—and together! That's what hurt. They ran off together. Rajah and Mitzie. It was probably her idea, the tramp. Just giving him the old double-X behind his back. Laughing at him. Bad weather, a poor take, and on top of it she had to run out on him too!

Ace bit into his lower lip. That was all the supper he needed. That and a drink.

HE SAT down on the edge of the platform and pulled out his pint. Almost full. He pulled out the cork and threw it away. It wouldn't be needed again for this bottle.

Tilting his head back, he swallowed. One swig for the rain. One swig for the lousy Georgia crackers. One swig for Rajah and Mitzie. Yes, and one swig for what he'd do to that broad if he ever caught up with her.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed that the rain had stopped. And then, he saw the girl.

She came wandering up the Midway, walking very slow. She was wearing some kind of gray slacksuit, but he could tell it was a girl all right, even from far away, because the lights showed off her blonde hair.

Blonde hell, she was platinum; as she got closer he saw the bush on her head was almost white. Her eyebrows, too. Like one of those—what did they call 'em?—albinos. Only her eyes weren't pink. They were kind of platinum too. Starey eyes. She gawked at everything as she went past the pitches.

Ace watched her coming; he had nothing else to do. Besides, she was worth watching. Even with that slacksuit on, he could see that she was really stacked. But built! Long legs, and plenty of meat on the torso. A disheroo.

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He slicked back his hair. When she passed the tent he'd step out and walk over, sort of smiling. Then—

Ace hesitated. Because the girl wasn't passing the tent. She came up to the end of the platform and stopped. She looked up and began to read the banners, moving her lips. She stood kind of funny, swaying a little as if she had a load. Maybe she did, at that. Anyhow, she rocked on her heels and stared up. She kept looking at one banner and mumbling to herself.

Ace turned his head. She was staring at the Girl From Mars. Yes, and that's what she was mumbling out loud, too; he could hear it.

"The Girl From Mars," she kept saying. She had a kind of a foreign accent. Blondie. Maybe a Swede or something.

"Something I can do for you?"

Ace swung over and came up behind her. She jumped about a foot.

"Teker—"

Swede all right. But built. She didn't wear any makeup. She didn't need to. Ace smiled at her.

"I'm Ace Clawson. Own this show. What can I do for you, sister?"

She sized him up and then looked back at the banner.

"The Girl From Mars," she said. "Is that truth?"

"Truth?"

"There is such a one? Inside there?"

"Uh—no. Not now. She scrammed."

"*Kep*?" The girl swallowed quickly. "I mean—what do you say?"

"She ran away. What's the matter, you don't talk English so good, huh?"

"English? Oh. Speech. Yes, I talk it." She spoke slowly, frowning. At least her eyebrows frowned, but her forehead didn't wrinkle. Her skin was gray, like the slacksuit. No buttons on the suit and she wasn't carrying a purse. Foreigner.

"She did not po—possess wings?"

Ace grinned. "No. Fakeroo." She was beginning her frown act again and he remembered she was probably drunk. "It was a gag, see? There is no Girl From Mars."

"But I am from *Rekk*."

"What?"

"I am from *Re*—from Mars."

She was lushed to the gills. Ace stepped back. "Oh, yeah. Sure. You're from Mars, huh?"

"I came today."

"Well, well. Just like that, huh? Pleasure or business?"

"*Kep*?"

"Skip it. I mean, what's on your mind? What can I do for you?"

"Hungry."

Not only a lush, but a mooch, yet. But she *was* built. And when Ace put his hand on her shoulder, she didn't move away. Her shoulder was warm. The heat just poured off her. Hot stuff. And she was hungry—

ACE GLANCED at the tent-flap behind him. He was beginning to get an idea. It came to him when he put his hand on her shoulder. To hell with Mitzie. This was just what the doctor ordered. And the Midway was deserted. The gang wouldn't be back from Sweeney's for forty-five minutes yet.

"Hungry," the girl repeated.

"Sure. We'll get you something to eat. But let's talk first. Come on inside." Ace got another grip on her shoulder. Warm. Soft. Good stuff.

The lights inside were dim. Lou had switched off when he left. The flaps were down over the platforms against the tent walls, as they were during the grind when only one freak performed at a time. Ace led her over to the Girl From Mars platform. There was a cot inside and he could lower the flap. Take it easy

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first, though.

She walked on her heels until he held her still and pushed her down on the steps on the side of the platform. Touching her made him want to hurry it up, even though he knew he had to be careful. The heat came off her in waves, and he was warm from the whiskey.

"So you're from Mars," he said, huskily, bending over her but remembering to keep a grin on his face. "How did you get here?"

"*Ertells.* The—machine. With the others. *Hydron,* very swift. Until we land. Then this, we did not expect. In the atmosphere. Electric."

"The storm? Lightning?"

She nodded expressionless. "You understand. The *kor*—the machine split. Broken. All *flerk.* All but I. I fell. And then I did not know. Because I had no orders. *Pre* was ended. You understand?"

Ace nodded. She was hot. God, she was hot. And built. He stepped back, still nodding. Let her finish. Maybe she'd sober up a little.

"So I walked. Nothing. Nobody. Dark. Then I saw light. This place. And the words. And you. I read the words."

"And here you are." Humor them. You got to humor them, dames and drunks. "How come you read English, and talk?"

"*Pre* did it. Education. Because he—planned we must come. Much I cannot know. I will understand. Now hungry."

There was no expression on her face. Lushes always twist their faces a lot. She didn't stagger, just walked on her heels was all. And there was no liquor smell from her. So—she wasn't drunk!

Ace stared.

He stared at the expressionless face, at the platinum hair and eyebrows. He stared at the sandals she wore, at the gray slacksuit without any pockets, without any buttons. No buttons. That was it. *She didn't have all her buttons.*

Yeah. Sure. She was a whack. She came here this afternoon, all right. Busted out of the county nut-house in the storm. No wonder she didn't carry a purse or anything. Just a lousy whack on the lam from the san.

Wouldn't that have to be the kind of break he got? A screwball with an empty gut and an empty noggin. That's all he needed. But she was *built.* And that's all he needed—

Why not?

ACE FIGURED fast. Half an hour, maybe. Long enough. He'd hustle her out of here right away. Nobody would know. It was a dirty trick, maybe. What the hell, he'd been getting the dirty end long enough himself; rain, no take, that damned Mitzie running out on him, no woman. He needed a change of luck. And besides, it wouldn't hurt her, maybe do her good. Nobody would find out anything and even if they did, she was a whack. Didn't know what she was saying, even. Why not?

"Hungry."

"Wait a minute, sister. I got a great idea. Come on back here for a second."

He motioned her to her feet, led the way up the steps, and lifted the flap. It was dark on the platform behind the canvas curtain. He groped for the couch, found it.

"Sit down here." He made his voice soft. She stood right next to him, not backing away, and when he pulled her down, pulled down all that heat and softness, she came without a sound.

He made himself wait, kept talking first.

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"Yeah, I got a great idea. Why not? You're from Mars, ain'tcha?"

"Yes. From *Rekk*."

"Sure. And my Girl From Mars skipped. So the way I figure it, why don't you come along with the show? You can have the same setup, thirty a week and chow, travel around and see the country. Nobody to tell you what to do or when to do it, see? Your own boss. Free. Get it—free?"

He wanted it to sound good. Sort of subtle, about being free. Even if she was a whack, she had enough sense to bust out and she probably knew she'd have to keep moving. Not that he'd let her tie up with the show, that was all con, but he wanted her to go for the deal. Then he could start.

"But that is not what you speak. Hungry—"

Ah, to hell with it! You don't waste your breath on a screwball. And here in the dark she wasn't a screwball. She was a disheroo, a tall blonde, hot, better than Mitzie, damn Mitzie anyhow, she was here and he could feel her, feel the warmth just busting out of her—

Ace put his hands on her shoulders.

"Hungry, huh? Well, don't you worry about that, sister. I'll take care of you. All you gotta do is cooperate."

Damn it! He heard the mumbling now, the gang was coming back, filing into the tent, climbing up on platforms and scraping chairs. He wouldn't have time.

But what the hell, he was behind the curtain, it was dark, he'd keep quiet and make her keep quiet and they could sneak out later. Besides, his hands were on her shoulders. Ace felt her lean against him, felt those curves, solid. Instead of drawing back, she kept coming in, she wasn't whacky, she knew what she was doing, this was all right.

SOMEBODY in the outer tent flicked up the lights, and a thin glow filtered through the canvas curtain. He grinned at her upturned face. Her eyes were wide, shining. He ran his hands down her back. She was strong, eager.

"Don't you worry about being hungry, baby," he whispered. "I'll take care of you."

The heat poured out of her as she pressed his shoulders. He bent his head to kiss her. She opened her mouth, wide, and in the dim light he saw her teeth. They were platinum-colored, too.

Then he wanted to draw back, but something about the heat pouring off her made him feel dizzy. Besides, she held on to him so tight, and she kept whispering "Hungry" over and over again, and now she was drawing him down on the cot and he saw the teeth coming at him. They were long and pointed. He couldn't move, she held him, the heat came out of her eyes to blind him, and the long, sharp teeth were coming closer and closer—

Ace hardly felt any pain. Everything turned to heat and whirled away. Somewhere in the distance a voice began to chant. It was Lou, standing outside, standing under the Girl From Mars banner and beginning his chant. That was the last thing Ace heard or knew. The chant, the spiel.

"The Wild Man From Borneo—he eats 'em alive—he eats 'em alive—"

COMING NEXT MONTH:—

THE FACE BEYOND THE VEIL

By Fronklin Bahl

A terrific story of cosmic forces and weird adventure by a talented new writer!

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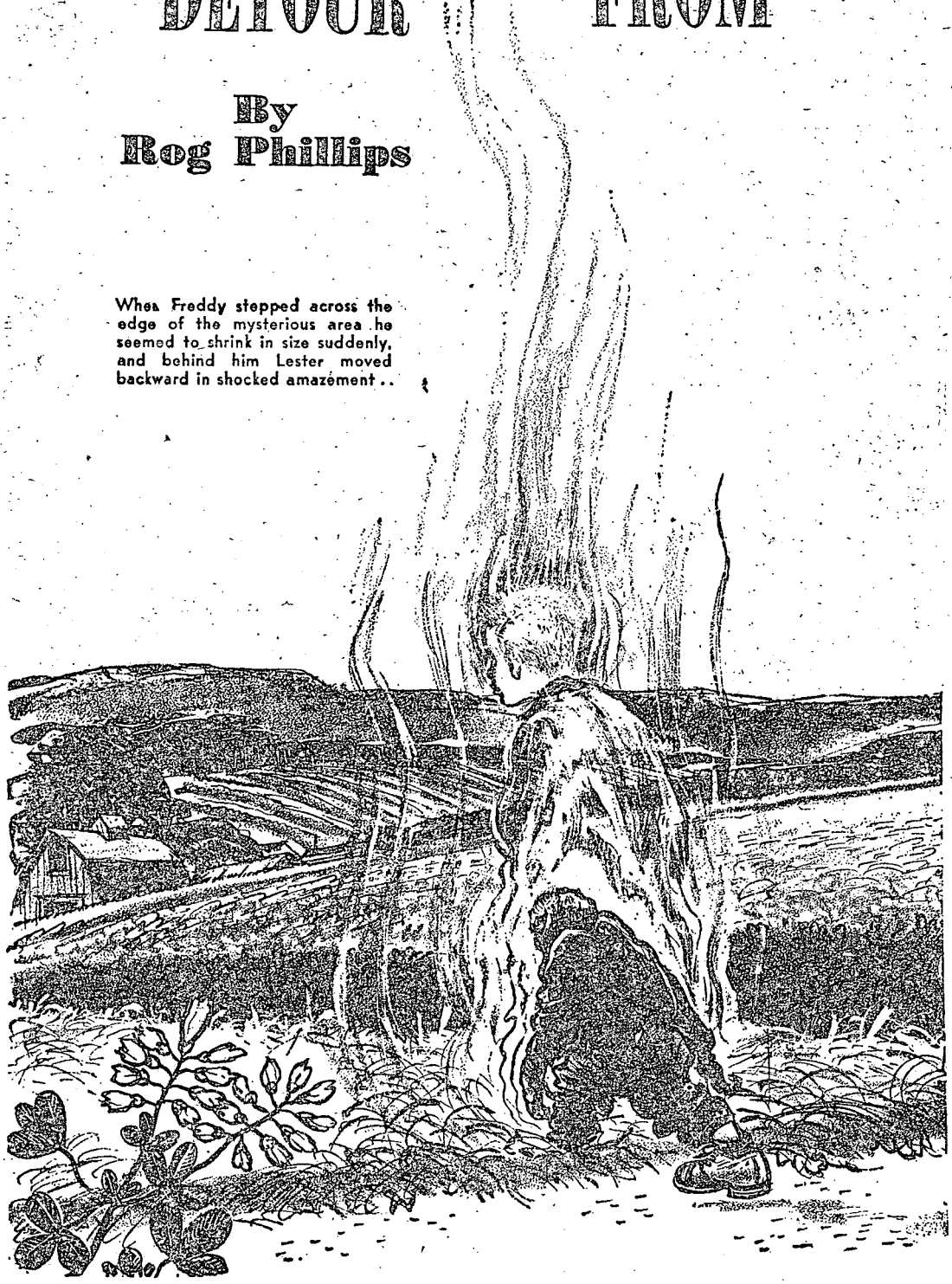
DETOUR FROM

By Reg Phillips

When Freddy stepped across the edge of the mysterious area he seemed to shrink in size suddenly, and behind him Lester moved backward in shocked amazement..



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TOMORROW

Was it possible that the small alfalfa field was actually a crossroad in time? And if so, what sort of law governed its travel?

LESTER BARCLAY didn't connect the circle of yellow, dying alfalfa in the hog pasture, with the excitement over the radio about the mysterious radar asteroid. Even if he had thought of it, which would have been quite remarkable in a fourteen year old farm boy, he would have seen no possible connection.

He did pause to wonder and to notice the almost sharp line of delineation between the healthy, dark green alfalfa and the withered plants. His sharp eyes found the three dead field mice in the withered area, too. He almost stepped over the border to get a closer look at them, then with a fear born of superstitious dread he ran across the field.

On the country road he soon met up with other young people on their way to school. He might have mentioned what he had seen to his friends, but he was already settling

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into the pattern of silent reticence of his father and decided against mentioning it to anyone.

It was nearly a week before he worked up courage to cross the hog pasture again. This time, without telling him anything, he took Freddy Bartholemue along. Freddy was his best friend and also handier with his fists than anyone else.

The sickly color of the alfalfa had changed again to a healthy deep green. Whatever had caused it had set the plants back, and the circular area was very easy to find because the alfalfa in it was shorter.

Lester led Freddy directly toward the area with deliberate innocence, pausing to let Freddy step over the line first. There was nothing cowardly in that. Merely caution. If anything serious had happened to Freddy he would have risked his life to go in after him.

What did happen was quite unexpected and unbelievable. Les kept his eyes on Freddy's back every instant. When Freddy stepped across the edge of the mysterious area Les' eyes seemed to get a slight cramp in their focus—and Freddy was several inches shorter than he had been before.

Freddy heard Lester's gasp of surprise. He turned his head to look back.

"Gosh, Les," he exclaimed. "What's happened to you? You look bigger than you did a minute ago!"

"You look smaller'n a peanut!" Les countered with a nervous laugh.

A look of belligerancy appeared on Freddy's face. He doubled up his fists and stepped out of the circle.

"Don't go callin' me no peanut," he said. "I'm as big as you are."

As he stepped past the mysterious edge he suddenly became normal size again to Lester's eyes.

"Gee whiz no," Les said placatingly. "I didn't call you no peanut. I just said in there you look like you're shorter. Look,—I'll step over where you were and you can see for yourself."

Suiting his actions to his words he stepped over into the mysterious area. Freddy watched him and experienced the same queer feeling of eye cramp.

"Sure enough," he whispered in hoarse amazement. "Hey! You're little enough now so I can lick you easy."

HE DASHED across the invisible line. His eyes saw Lester grow suddenly larger. Lester's eyes saw Freddy grow suddenly smaller. They were once again equal in size, but with the curious impression remaining that they were both somehow smaller than they had been.

Now Lester noticed something new.

"Freddy!" he said excitedly. "The alfalfa comes half way up to my knees. That's all the higher it comes out there, and it's shorter in here. It still looks shorter in here just like it did when we looked at it from out there."

"Yeah," Freddy said. "And look at the middle of the short stuff. It looks uphill!"

The two boys, half frightened now, took each other's hand for mutual security, starting toward the center of the area by common impulse. Their footsteps became slow and sluggish. Their bodies leaned forward more and more.

As they neared the center of the area they could feel some invisible force *pulling* them back. They reached the center of the hundred foot circle panting and exhausted, and sank down in the alfalfa to rest. The moment they had reached that

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center the hindering force had vanished.

"Gosh all fish hooks!" Les swore manfully. "The ground's perfectly level, but I'm almost afraid to take a step for fear I'll tumble downhill!"

"Me too," Freddy admitted. "What do you suppose is the matter with this place?"

"I don't know," Les said guiltily. Then he told Freddy how it had looked before. "It wasn't that way the day before that," he concluded. "I crossed right through this place and it wasn't that way any other time before that I can remember."

Freddy looked across the field with a little smile on his tanned face, sensing the subtle compliment of Les wanting him along when he ventured out to explore this mystery.

"Well," he said matter-of-factly. "We can't stay here. I gotta get home or dad'll tan me good."

He stood up determinedly and took a bold step. Immediately his sense of balance caused him to lean backward. He took a few more steps and stopped to look around when he heard Lester laughing.

"You look funny," Lester said. "Why don't you fall? You're tipped over far enough!"

"I don't feel tipped over," Freddy said nervously. "Come on! It doesn't feel half as bad as it looks."

He started on. Les, afraid to be left to brave the trip alone, jumped to his feet and ran the fifty feet to the edge, his feet seeming to be ahead of his body and his body seeming to be racing to catch up.

Catching the contagion of panic, Freddy ran also. They didn't pause until they reached the fence that surrounded the alfalfa field. There they turned and looked back. The hundred foot circle of stunted looking alfalfa seemed quite innocent and ordinary in appearance from the fence—except that the few pigs grazing in the field stayed studiously far away from it.

"I WANNA go too!" Five year old Jimmy Barclay stuck his chin out and doubled his pudgy fists.

"Oh go on and play with your dolls," Freddy Bartholemue said belittlingly.

"Pipe down, Freddy," Lester Barclay said softly. "If mom hears us she'll make us let him tag along."

"I wanna go! I wanna go! Ahh hn-hn-hn-hn. Waahhh," Jimmy wailed loudly.

Mrs. Barclay appeared in the open kitchen window.

"Lester," she called. "You take Jimmy with you."

"Oh, all right, mom," Lester said disgustedly.

Freddy glared at little Jimmy who grinned triumphantly, his eyes sparkling at the prospect of adventure.

The two fourteen year old boys skuffed their feet across the yard followed by five year old Jimmy. The two oldsters got a small measure of satisfaction out of ploughing through a small carpet of three week old pigs and making them scamper with grown up, angry grunts.

Circling the barn they took the lane to the alfalfa pasture, their hands dejectedly in their pockets, while Jimmy, his face serene and contented, trudged behind.

When they reached the pasture they lifted Jimmy over the fence, then hopped over. There were secret smiles on Lester's and Freddy's faces as they contemplated how Jimmy would probably react when confronted with the strange behavior of the mystery area.

They reached the edge and by silent agreement came to a casual stop. Jimmy paused beside them.

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When they showed no sign of going on, he wandered forward across the "line".

"Jimmy," Freddy said casually in a tone calculated to cause the five year old to merely turn his head.

Instead, Jimmy seemed not to hear. The moment he had stepped into the mystery area he had come to an abrupt pause, his eyes fixed straight ahead.

"Jimmy!" Freddy repeated, making his voice sharply commanding. Still Jimmy seemed not to hear.

Suddenly Jimmy turned and ran toward the fence. He had managed to climb over by the time Les and Freddy caught up with him.

Thinking he was running from fear they tried to stop him and calm him; but he shook them off and continued running along the lane toward the field where his father was working.

"Don't tell pop," Les coaxed, keeping even with his little brother. There was a determined, worried firmness to little Jimmy's lips. He didn't bother to reply.

JUD BARCLAY saw his two sons and the neighbor boy running across the field toward him in a manner that presaged trouble. He shut off the tractor and jumped down with swift ease, made it over the weeder with one light touch of a foot on its frame, and started to meet the boys.

"Daddy!" Jimmy called pantingly. "Come quick. Come quick! There's a lady in the alfalfa and she's hurt awful bad."

"Why!" Les and Freddy halted with amazed surprise.

"There isn't either!" Les denied in outraged tones. "Jimmy, you're lying."

"I'm NOT lying," Jimmy said desperately, taking his father's rough hand and trying to get him started. "There is too a lady in the alfalfa field. She's hurt bad and I think she's dying."

"Suppose we go see about this," Jud said tolerantly. He took his small son's hand and started to walk toward the lane.

"Run, daddy," Jimmy said anxiously, trying to pull his father.

Jud picked up his son and lifted him onto his shoulders. Jimmy wrapped his legs and hung on while Jud ran with long smooth strides.

Lester and Freddy, still protesting that Jimmy hadn't told the truth, trailed along behind. At the fence into the alfalfa field Jud stepped over with Jimmy still on his shoulders.

"Down," Jimmy requested when they neared the mystery area. When Jud let him down he took Jud's hand again and led him to the spot where he had stood, just over the line.

"See?" Les said triumphantly. "There isn't anybody there."

"Be quiet," Jud ordered calmly. "Tell me what you see, Jimmy." He took out a corncob pipe and filled it while he listened to his small son's voice.

"She's right there," Jimmy said, pointing to a spot in the exact center of the strange circle. "She's in a—a—*auto*. A funny kind of an auto; and she's hurt."

"Can she see you?" Jud asked. Behind his mask of pretended belief was a feeling of gleeful amusement. He had no doubt but that this was a game of make-believe that Jimmy was playing to mystify his older brother. He was "playing along" with it.

"She's looking right at me," Jimmy said in an awed voice.

Out of the corner of his eye Jud saw that if what he guessed was real-

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ly Jimmy's plan, he was succeeding. Both Freddy and Lester were changing from bold disbelief to doubtful uncertainty.

"She's talking," Jimmy whispered dramatically. "She wants to know where she is."

"Tell her she's just three miles due south of Ridley, Indiana," Jud suggested.

"That isn't what she wants to know," Jimmy shook his head swiftly. "She wants to know where she *is*."

"Tell her she's on the Earth," Jud suggested, his lips twisting in an effort to keep from laughing.

Jimmy looked toward the spot where he claimed the lady was.

"She says she don't think she can find out where she is from that," Jimmy said, looking gravely up at his father. "She says if you can tell her the law of gravitation she may be able to find out where she is."

THE STRUGGLING, suppressed grin on Jud Barclay's lips vanished abruptly. He looked piercingly at his small son.

Tell her it's—," he frowned in an effort to remember. "Tell her it's directly proportional to the mass and inversely proportional to the square of the distance, or fairly close to that."

Jimmy frowned toward the center of the mystery area for a full minute. Abruptly he smiled and looked gratefully up into his father's eyes.

"She told me to thank you, daddy," he said happily. "She says she can find out where she is now and call for help."

Jimmy turned his head and looked at the spot where he claimed to see the "lady". He remained that way with an intent expression on his face for several minutes. Once again he snapped out of his reverie abruptly.

"The lady says that isn't quite enough, daddy," he said. "She wants to know what things are made of here."

"Why,—why," Jud said. "Atoms, I guess. Yes. That's it. I remember now. There's ninety-two different kinds of atoms and everything's made out of them."

"That isn't what she wants to know either," Jimmy said after only ten seconds of silent frowning.

"I'll bet he's making this up as he goes along," Freddy whispered hoarsely into Lester's ear.

"What does she want to know," Mr. Barclay asked his five year old son coaxingly.

"She wants to know—," Jimmy frowned as if he were having difficulty. "What are the atoms made of?"

"Why, electrons and—and protons, I think," Jud faltered.

Jimmy frowned some more before speaking again.

"The lady says she can see you don't know what she must find out in order to know where she is," he finally said. "She wants us to bring out somebody who will know the answers right away quick or she will die."

"Are you *sure* that is what she said?" Jud asked gravely.

"Cross my heart and hope to die," Jimmy said, returning his father's gaze. Then he started to cry. Jud picked him up and turned toward the lane.

"Please, daddy," Jimmy sobbed against Jud's neck. "Don't let the beautiful lady die. Hurry."

Lester and Freddy were keeping pace with Jud.

"Aww," Freddy said. "If there was any ol' beautiful lady there she would be dead already. That thing's been there over a week now."

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"What thing?" Jud asked sharply, stopping.

Faltering, spelling each other off, Freddy Bartholemue and Lester Barclay told Mr. Barclay all about the strange circular area. Lester told how it had looked the first day. Each told his experience of wading to the center of the area and going out.

Jud Barclay's face grew more grim with each word. When the two boys finished talking he set Jimmy back on the ground.

"Run back and tell the lady I'll get help as soon as it can get here, Jimmy," he said. "And you, Lester, you go back with him and stay with him until I come back."

"GLAD YOU could get here right away, Dr. Brown," Jud said gruffly, opening the door for the young man sitting behind the wheel of the blue sedan.

"Whats the trouble, Mr. Barclay? Your wife?" Dr. Brown was in his early thirties.

"I—I want to explain why I called you instead of Doc Bradfield," Jud said uncomfortably, ignoring the question. "You see,—come with me and never mind your bag. You can't use it anyway."

"I'll take it just the same," Dr. Brown said, snatching it from the seat and trotting to keep up with Jud. "What's this all about?"

"I don't know," Jud said over his shoulder. "There isn't time to find out. You just come with me and do what you're told and we can ask questions later."

The two men trotted around the barn and down the lane to the alfalfa field. The three boys were huddled together out in the field. The hogs were all in one corner at the far end of the field, their snouts pointed inquiringly at the boys.

Dr. Brown, thinking there must be someone injured and laying concealed in the alfalfa leaped the fence without touching it and ran toward the boys. He was looking around mystified when Jud came up.

"Tell the lady that Dr. Brown can probably answer what she wants to know," Jud said to Jimmy.

"What can he do?" Freddy jeered. "She ain't there. You can walk right through her."

"You be quiet or I'll send you home," Jud ordered. "Now, Jimmy."

Jimmy looked toward the spot where he claimed to see the lady. A moment later he turned. His grave eyes looked pleadingly at Dr. Brown.

"She wants you to tell me what atoms are made of," he said.

Dr. Brown glanced suspiciously at Jud Barclay, saw the serious expression on his face, and decided to humor the five year old boy and ask questions himself later.

"Tell her atoms are made of electrons, protons and neutrons, Jimmy," he said. "Tell her the electrons are about eighteen hundred times lighter in mass than the protons and neutrons."

Jimmy concentrated once more. Suddenly his face lighted up with a smile.

"She says you are telling her what she wants to know," he said happily. "Now she wants to know if there are any other things on that order." He stumbled over the last three words.

"Tell her there are also things called mesons or mesotrons, that are of varying masses between that of the electron and that of the proton, with some of them almost three hundred times the mass of the proton."

In a brief moment Jimmy said, "She says that's all she needs to know to give her location so she can be rescued!"

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"Tell her I'd like to ask a question or two myself," Dr. Brown said, smiling mischievously.

Jimmy frowned a moment.

"She's busy calling for help right now," he said gravely. He turned his eyes back to the center of the mystery area again and seemed to be watching something invisible. Nearly five minutes later he turned and spoke.

"She says it is only fair for her to answer your questions," he said. "Your information saved her life and she says she thanks you."

"Ask her how knowing the building blocks of matter can tell her where she is, since the laws of nature are the same everywhere," Dr. Brown asked.

JIMMY turned his face to the center spot. When he answered he kept his face there rather than turning and looking at the doctor.

"The lady says that is wrong," he said slowly as if repeating something someone was telling him. "The laws of nature are like the key and the padlock. She is like a key in the wrong lock here. The energy of our nature won't fit in her substance, and the energy in her substance won't fit in our things, so we can't see or feel her."

"Then how can you—." Dr. Brown stopped, feeling foolish at having fallen in his own trap. He glanced wryly at Jud Barclay and continued. "Ask her how YOU can see her."

Jimmy frowned. Suddenly he began to cry.

"What did you say?" Dr. Brown asked anxiously.

"She said I can't see her," Jimmy wailed. "She said I—only—see—her—like you'd see—a finger—through a piece of oiled paper."

"But why should that make you cry, Jimmy?" Dr. Brown said soothingly.

"Because I love her and she's a beautiful lady," Jimmy cried, rubbing his eyes with his fists.

For no apparent reason he stopped crying and smiled happily through his tears.

"She said I mustn't cry," he said. "She said she is the beautiful lady but I can't see all of her."

"Fine," Dr. Brown said with a grateful glance toward the empty air over the spot where Jimmy kept concentrating his eyes.

"Ask her what the trouble is," he asked after a moment's thought.

"She says her—*auto* got out of order and she hurt herself and got badly burnt," Jimmy answered.

"How long ago was this?" Dr. Brown asked quickly, a strange eagerness in his voice.

"She says she don't know what our time is," Jimmy replied.

"The boys say this strange thing began to happen a little over a week ago," Jud said quietly. "They didn't tell me about it or I would have come out and looked for myself."

THE WIND came with sudden violence. Freddy had been standing on one foot. The wind toppled him over. It also picked Dr. Brown's grey felt hat off his head and lifted it about twenty feet into the air. It fell strangely.

The wind had carried it up and about ten feet into the strange area. When it fell it fell back the way it had gone up, landing at the doctor's feet.

The wind lasted less than ten seconds. It was replaced by a remarkable set of sensations and sights.

To each of the two men and three boys the alfalfa field seemed to tip up at a different angle and become the side of a fairly steep hill. Every one of the five seemed to be leaning

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completely off balance in a different direction.

It was Jimmy who took their minds off their changed surroundings and back to the things they had been dealing with before.

"It's another auto!" he exclaimed. "There's another lady and she's helping the beautiful lady out of her auto!"

"Tell her not to go yet," Dr. Brown said desperately. In his mind he was saying, "I don't believe this. Can't. But I can't let it get away from me yet."

"She's sleeping," Jimmy said. "The other lady said she will die if they don't go right away."

"Tell her please," Dr. Brown said desperately. "Ask her what they are."

Jimmy concentrated.

"She says they are just as real as we are," he said. "She says the basic laws of her universe are in-com-patible with the basics of our universe, and so they are separate, or almost so."

There was suddenly a strange vibrational sensation. A weak but determined breeze started up and was still almost before it began. The field tilted down level for everyone. The last strange feeling was that the surface of the immediately surrounding alfalfa seemed to rise up two or three inches.

Things became normal with such abruptness that they seemed unreal. Jimmy began to cry again. His older brother, Lester, went to him and put a consoling arm around his small shoulders.

"Don't cry, Jimmy," he said awkwardly. "WE love you."

"Sure we do," Jud said, picking little Jimmy up and tossing him in the air and catching him, with an effort at gayness.

"Don't, daddy," Jimmy sniffled.

"O. K., son," Jud said gruffly. He cradled Jimmy in one arm and held him tightly against his chest with the other and let him cry quietly.

"Gee! It's all gone!" Freddy said, awed. "Look, Les. It don't work no more." He hopped over into what had been the mystery area where he would seem to become smaller. Nothing happened.

"Heck!" Lester exclaimed, disappointed.

Dr. Brown and Jud Barclay walked slowly, side by side toward the fence.

"I wonder if whatever that was could have anything to do with that mystery thing that flashed all over the sky a little over a week ago," Dr. Brown said quietly. "It didn't burn up like an ordinary meteor would do, but just left a trail of slightly glowing fire behind it. You remember the scientists were in quite a furor about it. A reward was offered to anyone who discovered where it landed."

"Probably the thing that caused all that fuss all right," Jud said. He smiled wryly and added, "But try to prove it now!"

THE TWO men stepped over the hog fence surrounding the alfalfa field and went down the lane toward the barn.

"What I can't figure," Jud said as they left the lane and went into the barnyard. "Is how the law of gravitation and the things you told her about neutrons and such could tell her where she was, while telling her she was on the Earth didn't make sense to her."

"Oh, she asked what the law of gravitation was?" Dr. Brown asked interestedly.

"Yes," Jud said. "And when I told her she said it wasn't enough. Just like there were some places where

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there was a different law of gravitation and other places where the law of gravitation was the same, and she had to know more. Like maybe someone would ask which way the Smiths live and I would answer down the north fork of the road, and then they would ask how *far* down."

"Yes, I can see that," Dr. Brown replied. "And what she said about her reality and ours being incompatible,—that violates the very foundation of science which says that the laws of science are universal. It's called the postulate of uniformity, I believe. I'm no scientist, but I think I can vaguely see what she was trying to say. Why even with our own stuff glass will pass only visible light, and is opaque to ultraviolet. Porcelain will pass ultraviolet and not visible light. And a glass tube will convey liquids, while a copper wire will conduct electricity..."

He stopped talking with a dazed look in his eyes.

"Ha!" he snorted. "Here I go talking like the visions of a five year old were reality!"

"What WE experienced wasn't the imaginings of a five year old," Jud said dryly.

"No," Dr. Brown said doubtfully. "I guess not. But WE didn't see any beautiful lady. I wonder where he picked up that expression, anyway."

"I call my wife that sometimes," Jud said, turning red under his tan.

"See?" Dr. Brown said, putting a wealth of meaning into the word. He looked down at Jimmy, who was sound asleep with his head on his father's chest and a smile on his lips.

"Just the same—" Jud began stubbornly.

"Yes, I know," Dr. Brown interrupted. "You don't see how it all could have come out of your son's imagination, arising from the simple fact of something mysterious being there for a week and then going away. Maybe it couldn't. It doesn't make any difference, now that it's not there to back us up if we tried to tell what we think happened.

"But childish imagination or not," he went on thoughtfully. "It opens up something interesting. Suppose instead of one set of natural laws and one type of universe of matter, we have two—or maybe more; and the matter and energies in any one of them sort of go together in lumps, so that here you have one law of gravitation and one set of chemical elements, and so on, and somewhere else you have another and different setup. Then light from one would have to maybe change its wavelengths and even maybe its entire form in order to affect matter in the other in any way, and matter in one might be so different that it wouldn't even be considered real in the other, and vice versa. That makes me wonder if we were any more solid to Jimmy's lady than she was to us!"

They had reached the doctor's car. As Dr. Brown opened the door and dropped his black case on the seat, Jud began to chuckle throatily.

"What's so funny?" Dr. Brown asked, smiling.

"One thing Jimmy's beautiful lady had in common with us, anyway," Jud replied.

"What's that?" the doctor asked, pausing with his foot on the running board.

"She was out driving and smashed up her car," Jud replied. "About now I'll bet her husband is grinding his teeth over the repair bill, not to mention the hospital bill if she was banged up as much as she claimed."

Dr. Brown climbed behind the wheel and started the motor, a wide

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grin on his face.

"Maybe her husband carried insurance on it," he suggested. His eyes dropped to Jimmy's sleeping face with its serene smile. His professional eye told him the five-year-old boy was in perfect health. As he slipped the gear shift into low he smiled at Jud Barclay.

"About five, isn't he?" he asked.

"Don't worry then. He'll get over this before he grows up. It's just puppy love."

THE END

VIDEO ADVANCE

By Leslie Phelps

BY NOW the novelty of TV has begun to wear off, and it's looked at as a "must". That TV will replace radio in five or ten years is almost a certain bet. The advances have come thicker and faster than in the early days of radio. And in some respects, they parallel that art.

For example, it is becoming easier and easier to buy TV sets which do not require an external antenna which has been a bugaboo and a drawback to many people. They didn't want "birdcages" all over the roof-tops. Well, with the newer sets, with built-in antennas, the external gadget is eliminated. However, and this must be emphasized, an external antenna is an asset, bringing in stronger signals, with less likelihood of interference. It is recommended if at all possible that an outside aerial be used.

The man-size screens are the common ones today. Before it was seven, then ten, then twelve inch jobs which looked like they hog the market. Today it's even bigger ones—going up into the sixteen inch range and larger.

Projection TV in the home, which permits enormous screens, is an established fact. These are highly popular and they're going to grab deeply into the future trade. Theatre TV is up-and coming too. The World Series has appeared in numerous shows on projection TV set-ups.

What does the future hold? That is a hard one to answer. Color of course, is certain. Simplicity of tuning and reliability also will be future musts. And we suspect that adult education is going to receive a terrific boost. Why this hasn't yet been done, we're not sure, but it's coming. Imagine a classroom of twenty million people!

THE DREAM

By William Karney

IT COULD have been the heavy dessert of apple pie a la mode. Or it could have been the shrimp cocktail. Anyway the causes weren't important.

He knew it was a dream. It had to be. It couldn't be reality. The weirdness was too great.

First it was like being in empty space, an intense and terrifying darkness. Then gradually his floating body seemed to reorient itself. From floating freely it settled down slowly—almost gingerly, until he felt as if he were standing. And he was. First it was in the center of a vast plain—still dark and gloomy.

Then the illusion of spaciousness vanished. He was in a sort of room—no, it wasn't a room—it was more like a corridor. It seemed long and endless even though he couldn't look far down into it, and yet he was aware of its length.

But the odd thing was the shape of the corridor. It was triangular in section—an equilateral triangle, the apex overhead, one side forming the floor.

As if by magic, a long stick appeared in his hand, and at its end was a brush. By its own volition the brush touched the floor. There was some liquid on it, but no need existed for its renewal. It always seemed wet.

He ran, ran violently along the triangular corridor, the brush dangling from his hand and making a dark streak along the floor.

Fear goaded him, and he looked behind as he ran, but there was nothing to be seen. He ran endlessly. The corridor was immense now, as if it stretched into infinity. Suddenly he stopped running. While he'd been running the brush had been trailing and making its streak on the floor. But now there was a corresponding streak on *both* the slant walls, as well as the floor!

Derrick awoke with a start. He reached

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over and turned on the light. It was three A.M. He looked at the desk near the wall. Then he started to laugh. No wonder he'd been dreaming like a surrealist. The strip of moulded clay still lay on the desk. It was triangular in cross-section and joined at the ends into a circle.

Derrick grinned sheepishly. I'm taking topology and Dr. Hanson's lectures too seriously, he thought. Hanson's words echoed through his mind— "...a three dimensional analogy of the Moebius Strip, gentlemen is easy to deduce. We take a strip of clay of triangular cross-section, rotate one end through one hundred and twenty degrees, and then press the ends together. Presto, we have a topological curiosity! Now I run this stylus along the center of one side—what's this? I have to go around three times before I come back to the beginning..."

Advanced mathematics, ugh! Derrick turned out the light and lay back. This time I'll try thinking of girls, he said to himself!

THE MARTIAN LANDING

☆ By A. T. Kedzie ☆

IT'S OLD stuff now, and the crack has been made by everybody who's ever talked about it but I can't help repeating it because it's so true. *The biggest boost to Man's ego was the landing of the "Scythzzen", because the Martians proved to be so much like men in technical accomplishments.* I like that remark because it's so true. And *I* know. After all I was there!

Dig out the films from the vidi—libe someday when you want to while away an interesting afternoon. I know the Martian's ship wasn't much by today's standards. The uranium drive, the size and everything else have changed, but there is one thing they can't take away.

Then *Scythzzen* was the first rocket to astrogate interplanetary space.

I was just a technician forty years ago on Goddard Field when it happened. We were still fooling with liquid-fueled rockets then. We thought we were good because we'd dropped a projectile on the Moon. Well, for *that* time it was good.

But then comes the *Scythzzen*. The field was deserted about eight o'clock at night and I was sitting out a tour of watch-duty in a shack near the edge of the field. I was reading when I heard the roar, and I thought—I knew—some fool had triggered off an experimental job.

I dropped the book and dashed outside. It was dusk, but I didn't miss a thing. I couldn't.

Well, I didn't believe my own eyes even though it was happening right in front of me. Here was this rocket, a liquid-fueled job from its roar, settling slowly to the ground near a gantry crane.

I had a funny feeling. In the brilliant glare of its flames, I knew it wasn't an Earth job. True it looked conventional—but it had that funny, funny, look, especially those wings—they were like, well, I guess you'd say, "ears".

I was shaking like a leaf when I walked up to the thing. The ground was still hot around its base. I stayed about thirty feet away. You'd say "ten meters today" but we still used feet in those days. Anyhow, the lock in the side pops open. Already around the field, the dozen or so sleeping technicians were rushing this way and I can still hear Franzl's high-pitched voice asking me, "What's happening? Who stole it?"

The door opens, and the Martian steps out. Everybody's familiar with their spongy bodies, their tentacular limbs etc., but this one wore a space suit of some fabricoid and he looked more like a sphere than anything else. Good thing too. I guess I'd have run a mile if I'd seen his true form so soon after the shock of seeing the rocket.

The figure paused on the edge of the open door which was about twenty feet from the ground. I hollered to Leston to bring the crane and its small elevator over and he did. The figure stepped back in the doorway, then came right out. Then I saw the tentacle. It was wrapped around a cylinder. I thought the thing was a weapon.

But nonchalantly the arm reaches to one side and starts to write on the rocket side. When it did that, I knew everything was all right. He made one straight mark, then two, then three, then four, then five. He stopped, drew a circle and a square and stepped back a little.

The rest is history. In an hour that field was a mass of milling humanity and the governor at the time had to call out the National Guard (a military organization) to keep things under control.

I followed through with the whole thing and I consider it the greatest experience of my life. When I saw what a risk the Martians had taken with their crate, I knew we'd make the stars someday. They knew some things we didn't and we knew some they didn't. Put the two together and you've got astrogation.

I know it's all history now—but I still say, take a look at the vidies, dig up the old stuff, put yourself in my frame of mind, and you'll know what a real thrill is. Even the Lunar or the Martian runs can't beat it!

* o o

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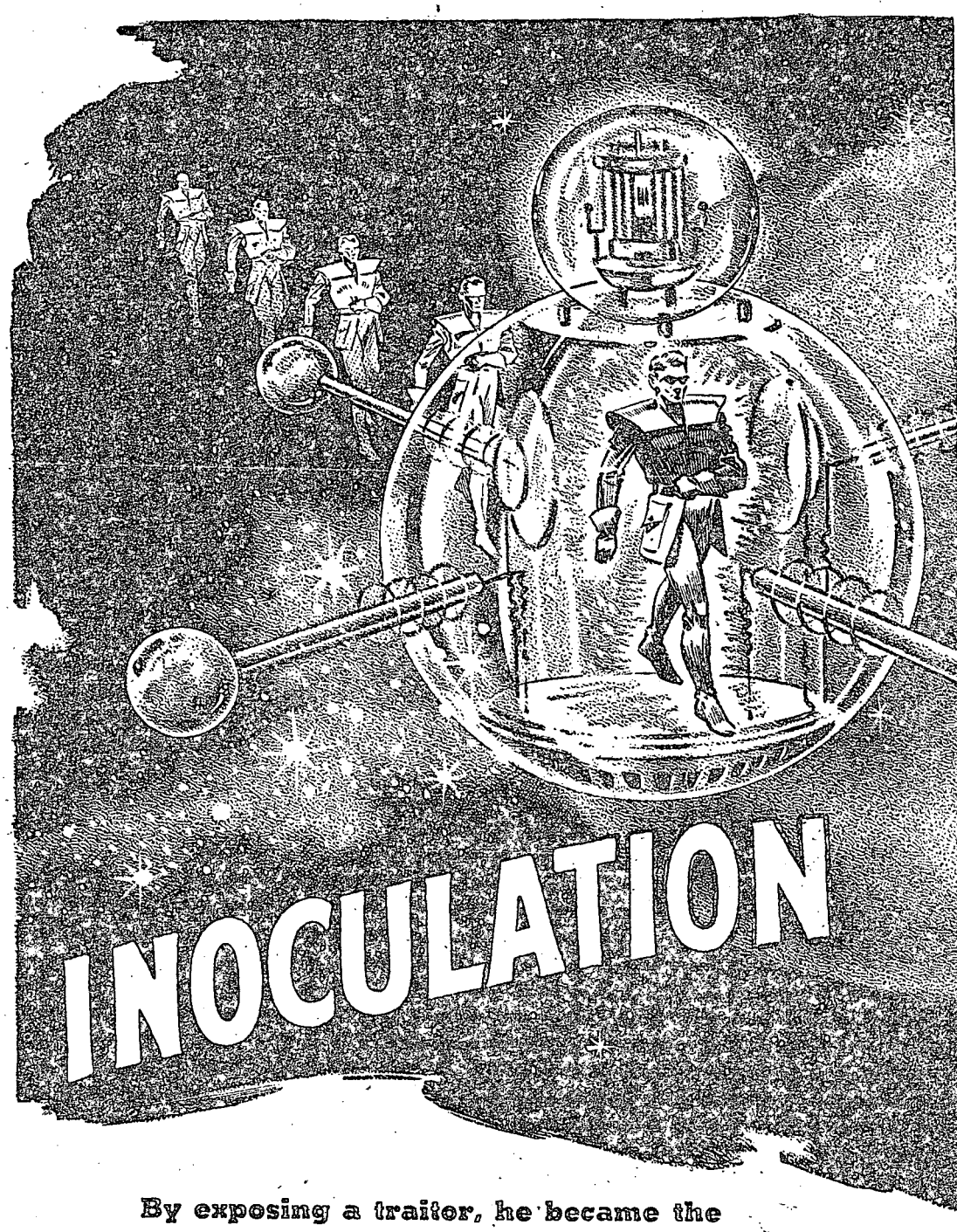

INOCULATION

By exposing a traitor, he became the leader of his people . . . only to learn that treachery may be another word for patriotism

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They strode into the vast machine one by one, and they emerged—somehow changed . . .

By
Roger Flint Young

CO-ORDINATOR Dancin stared coldly at the colonel who had risen from his seat near the far end of the conference table.

"Colonel Fraden," Dancin acknowledged.

The thin, tired-looking little man in Space Patrol uniform bobbed his head, cleared his throat twice, then started to speak.

"I'm afraid I'm back to my old subject, gentlemen. I'm asking consideration of the Council for the granting of a higher priority to Dimensional Research." The Colonel looked nervously up and down the long table, glanced once at the Co-ordinator, then sat down quickly.

Dancin frowned in annoyance, shuffled the papers in his hands, waiting for someone to speak. He looked questioningly around the table, then straightened in his chair.

"I don't think I have anything to add to what I've said in the past on this subject. My opinion remains that the Outsiders reach fighting positions against us by travelling faster than light. Colonel Fraden persists in his belief that they come from another dimension.

"At present Dimensional Research is 17th on the priority list. There have been no new allocations to it

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for some months, and I know of no reason to change its status. However, I'll no longer take responsibility for blocking Colonel Fraden's pet theory. I'm requesting a Council vote on the matter."

A few minutes later Co-ordinator Dancin again looked at Colonel Fraden.

"Seven in favor of granting your request, Colonel. Thirty-four members wish priority to remain as it is. Twelve members didn't vote. I assume they are undecided, or possibly are in favor of dropping Dimensional Research to a still lower priority."

Fraden bowed his head slightly. "I submit, Co-ordinator."

"Very well. Today's session of the Council is adjourned."

There was no movement at the table as the council members waited for Dancin to leave the Council Room through the Co-ordinator's Entrance.

The door closed behind him. Unobserved in the short hallway, Co-ordinator Dancin allowed his erect figure to slump; his face sagged, and in an instant all the appearance of cold, certain self-confidence was gone from him.

Colonel Fraden would have to be taken care of. The Space Patrol officer was entirely too close with his guessing, too willing to go on being certain he was right. Fortunately the man had little personality, practically no ability to influence other men's thinking. It was a wonder how he ever got on the Council.

Dancin shook his head, as though that might help him clear it, and walked down the hall as though he were a man under the sentence of death.

DANCIN walked slowly up the marble steps of his official residence. He was erect now, young and fresh-looking, as though the grinding pressure of the day had affected him not a bit. He walked slowly, yet as a man who thought rather than as one who was tired and frightened to the core of him.

He waited for the butler to open the door, saw to it that a smile touched his lips.

"Good afternoon, Wilson."

"Good afternoon, sir...Chief Pastor and some of his men are waiting to see the Co-ordinator."

Dancin looked at him, uncomprehendingly.

"Who?"

"The Chief of the Council Police, Co-ordinator, and nine of his men. They're in the front study."

"All right, Wilson. I'll ring if I want you."

He didn't allow himself to think. If he thought about it he'd turn and run, try to get away. They couldn't have anything on him. It was probably— Probably— Probably something else. There couldn't be anything—

Pastor was a chunky little man whose face was always calm, always uninterested in his surroundings. His bright little eyes danced over the Co-ordinator's face, as though not really seeing it. His voice, when he spoke, had an unusual flat quality to it, a complete lack of any emotion.

"I hope the Co-ordinator will pardon our intrusion. I thought we had better see him at his Residence."

What did he mean, Dancin wondered. What was the man getting at? He knew Pastor's reputation; Coldly efficient, ambitious, ruthless. A bulldog with brains and imagination. The man was said to have a desire for glory and popularity. He'd be the kind who'd want the Co-ordinator's job. He— Dancin

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checked the thoughts. After all, who wasn't after the Co-ordinator's job? Who was there who didn't want it?

"Quite all right, Chief. What is it?"

Pastor hesitated a moment, as though seeking the exact right words. "There's been a rumor my men picked up that an attempt might be made on the Co-ordinator's life. We've been unable to get any sort of information, but I thought the Co-ordinator should be informed of the rumor...I brought some of my men along—"

"It won't be necessary, Chief. I appreciate your interest, but I'm sure my life is in no more danger now than it usually is. And I'm sure your men have more important assignments."

Dancin tried to make his face reflect thoughts that went with his words. The whole business was flimsy, much too flimsy. Pastor was here with a story that was worthless on the face of it. Why?

Pastor bowed slightly. "As the Co-ordinator desires, of course." He turned slightly, looking at the men grouped behind him, nodded his head. They moved toward the door.

Dancin went with them, out into the big entrance hall, stood close to Wilson, watching the Chief and his men leave. Wilson closed the door behind them, turned with a puzzled expression on his aging face.

"Nine of them, Co-ordinator. Only nine of them went out."

"You said nine when I came in."

Wilson shook his head. "The Chief and nine of his men. Ten of them came in...I'm sure."

"All right, Wilson. If you find the missing one around throw him out...I'm going to be down in the third basement for a while."

Dancin walked toward the elevator, then turned abruptly to the stairs. He went down the three flights slowly, keeping his left hand on the guide rail. First basement. No use worrying about Chief Pastor. Second basement. What had the man wanted?

Third basement. He turned to the left, walked along the narrow corridor. He'd almost reached the fourth door when he felt the concussion wave.

He swore softly, bitterly. The Outsiders were raiding the city, and no raid was scheduled. He hurried then, reached the fourth door and pushed it open.

GARRON heard the door open, shifted his position slightly, carefully, realizing for the first time how cramped his body had become. He moved his head slowly until it was at the edge of the big machine he was hidden behind.

The dim, apparently ever-burning bulbs showed the face of the man closing the door behind him. Garron felt a sense of relief that it *was* Co-ordinator Dancin.

Dancin spared no time to look around the small room but went directly to the corner where Garron had noticed the small desk. The Co-ordinator sat down in the well padded chair, picked up a microphone from the desk-top, leaned back in the chair and started to talk.

"September 17th," Garron heard him say into the microphone, "and no unusual progress can be recorded in the diary. Research in all lines is progressing well enough, but with no brilliant achievements.

"At the Council Meeting Colonel Fraden brought up the matter of increasing scope of Dimensional Research. It is possible that he is right, although the council voted him down.

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"The Outsiders continue their attacks against the Solar System. Again the report must go in the diary that as yet we have no idea as to their origin, bases, or even guesses as to their physical make-up. All ships which fall to us continue to explode before they can be investigated, leaving no trace of their crews.

"As I've mentioned before I would like to move this Co-ordinators, Official Recording Diary to another location, along with all machinery in this room. It is only the wishes of previous Co-ordinators, as expressed in this diary, that make me leave it here in the third basement.

"In the matter of bringing remaining nations of the world under the control of the Co-ordinator's Council, it is my opinion that these half-dozen small and backward nations—"

* * *

Garron faced Pastor across the desk in the chief's private office. Garron's youngish, serious face still held the faint flush of shame.

"That's all it was, Chief. Just the Official Diary Room of the Co-ordinators. Apparently Co-ordinator Dancin doesn't even realize it is spy-proof. He wants to move the whole works someplace else, so he won't have to go to the third basement to record in it."

Pastor nodded heavily. His face showed no trace of his inner disappointments.

"All right, Garron. You still did your duty as a citizen and a scientist when you reported the matter to me. You went beyond this when you agreed to make the investigation yourself."

Garron flushed again. "After all, it was my hunch, Chief. I couldn't very well ask you to act officially on such slight evidence."

"Well, we're all happy now, and we can forget the whole incident. In fact, we'd better."

"Yes, I guess we'd better. After all— Well, I'll be getting along. Chief."

Pastor nodded. "The pistols I loaned you—"

"Yes. I didn't need them of course." Garron reached into his pockets, brought out the two small weapons. "Let's see. This is the one you told me to use first, if I had to. Here you are. And here's the one you said to use if the other one didn't work... I don't think I've ever seen—"

Pastor reached out and took the second pistol from him, smiled to cover his abruptness.

"You didn't need them, so it's all right... What do you think of the latest raid?"

"Raid! Another one? When?"

"While you were in the Residence."

Garron shook his head. "I didn't hear it...Of course, I was in the third basement, but—"

PASTOR frowned slightly, then smiled. "I guess you couldn't hear it there, at that. The Outsiders concentrated the attack on the south side of the city. Then entirely destroyed one block, but there wasn't much other damage. We brought down twenty-seven of their ships with the new Nestors. We drove them away, as a matter of fact."

"Good...I was wasting my time. If I'd been operating the Pelap—"

"Yes, I thought of that...Perhaps next time, though."

"Certainly then. I won't take up any more of your time now, Chief."

Pastor watched the door close behind Garron, then sat back in his chair. Garron should have heard

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the sound of the raid, even in the third basement. He picked up the second pistol he'd given Garron, pulled the trigger.

One side of the pistol fell away revealing the mechanism inside. Pastor reached in carefully, extracted the small spool, then looked at it thoughtfully.

He carried the spool to the player on the far side of his office, dropped it on the spindle, pressed the starting button. Then he turned the volume up and went back to his chair.

At first he heard the sounds he'd heard before: His own voice giving the real pistol and the pistol with the recorder concealed inside to Garron. Then the approach to the residence, the butler's voice, and the noise of men moving around and talking softly in the study.

Then Garron had left them, made his way unobserved to the third basement. Pastor heard the player reproduce the sounds of Garron's footsteps in the small room in the third basement, the scuffling of his feet as he found concealment behind the machine. Then, for a long time there was silence except for the occasional rustle of Garron's clothing.

Then the sound of the door opening again and Co-ordinator Dancin entering and taking his chair beside the desk.

Pastor was only half listening. This would be the Co-ordinator recording in his diary. Garron had already given him the essential points of that.

"There's a raid on." It was Dancin's voice. "No raid was scheduled."

The reply came in a voice unlike any that Pastor ever heard. He sat up suddenly, paying close attention. The voice was— He wasn't sure; it was soft and harsh at the same time, grating and soothing, almost human-sounding, yet with something about its every tone to show it could never have come from a human throat.

"An emergency raid, Dancin. I have just discovered that Colonel Fraden has been having some dimensional research projects pushed. The men got the answer—*the* answer, Dancin—less than an hour ago. It is necessary to destroy the area in which the research was being done. We can take no chances."

"No, I guess not." Dancin's voice sounded tired and weak. "I've been afraid of Fraden— Well, no matter ...We've just finished installation of the Nestor Defences here. I've promised great things for them."

"I am aware of that, Dancin. I have allocated twelve ships to be shot down by the Nestors. The raid will be beaten off after we have destroyed the research block."

"All right. Twelve ships isn't enough. Make it more."

"I can spare twenty-seven at this moment. It will mean no ships can be shot down for a while."

THERE WAS a silence, then Dancin's voice again. "The next raid will be against London on Monday. They have no Nestors as yet. Use the twenty-seven now, and let London have no hits. It will increase my prestige, at that. I've been basing a lot on the Nestor defences."

"Fourteen," the voice said. "Nineteen, twenty-five, twenty-seven. Your twenty-seven ships are down and exploded, Dancin, and all of them hit by Nestors. My ships are retreating. It was a victory for you, Dancin."

"Yes."

"You have a visitor, Dancin."

"What do you mean?"

"Before you came, another man

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came into the room and hid behind one of the machines. I put him to sleep, of course."

"He came with Pastor. A detective."

"No, Dancin. I have read his surface thoughts. He is a scientist. He is the Department Head in charge of Unknown Spectrum Regions Preliminary Research."

"That's Garron, then. What the devil is he doing here?"

"He and his men developed what they call a Pelap. That is their provisional name for a personnel-locator-and-position-plotter. It is a viewing screen that works at long range and shows only living vegetable and animal matter. With it I gather they hoped to be able to look into Outsider ships and see what manner of people these invaders are."

"And they did?"

"They didn't have the chance. Garron decided it was too important to turn over to Controls. He wanted to direct it to your attention. Yesterday afternoon he watched you with it as you left the Council Meeting and came here."

"Why?"

"He had it in mind to tell you what you did, arouse your interest, and get you to agree to an early demonstration."

"Then why did he come here with Pastor?"

"Because while he was watching you yesterday you came into this room. You disappeared from his sight, of course, as soon as you came through the door into this dimension. But Garron thought this must be a spy-proof room, and he wondered why precautions were taken against a device which was unknown to any except himself and a couple of workers. So he went to Pastor."

"That Pastor—"

"Pastor was interested, but he was unwilling to take any action. Apparently Garron was maneuvered to the point where he agreed to make the investigation himself if Pastor would get him into your residence. Pastor armed him with two pistols, just in case, and got him into the house. Garron came here, hid himself behind the machine. Then I put him to sleep."

"All right. I don't want any complications from this. I'll leave the room. You wake him up so he won't know he's been asleep. I'll come back in and—I'll think of something innocent enough. This can be the Official Diary Room, I guess...I'll convince him, then make it easy for him to get out of the Residence."

"That should do it...Don't struggle too hard, Dancin. Your time is about up, anyhow."

Dancin laughed shortly. "I'm good for a while longer. When I first got the job you gave me six months. I've lasted over a year."

"A record," the voice admitted. "Remember, though, that you are the fifty-seventh Co-ordinator in the forty-three years of the war against the Outsiders. And all Co-ordinators were appointed for life."

"I'm not forgetting. That's why I've lasted...I'll go out now. You can wake Garron."

Pastor heard the Co-ordinator leave his desk and go out the door. Then there were vague rustlings that must be the sounds of Garron waking up. The door opened again, and Pastor heard the footsteps, the sound of Garron shifting his position so he could see better.

"September 17th," came Dancin's voice, "and no unusual progress can be recorded in the diary. Research in all—"

Pastor ceased to listen. That was the talk to convince Garron.

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PASTOR walked slowly, shoulders squared, trying to assure himself, through the marble hall. He felt the sweat in the palms of his clenched hands, and told himself over and over again that he must be calm.

He stopped before the entrance to the Council Hall and faced the aging sergeant-at-arms.

"I request admittance as a citizen."

The wrinkled old face came around to meet him, and deep in them old eyes sparkled to hear the beginnings of the well known ritual.

"As a citizen you are represented inside."

"Is there one inside who challenges the Co-ordinator for me?"

"There is none...The price of the challenge is death. Would you have it on your head?"

"Yes. Or on that of the Co-ordinator."

"Very well, Citizen." The sergeant-at-arms rose, joints cracking audibly, to his feet, pressed the button that caused the great doors to the Council Hall to open. "Members of the Council," his voice was shrill and quavering, yet loud enough, "a citizen comes with a challenge."

Pastor waited while the stir went through the members seated at the long table, saw them turn and twist that they might see the challenger. Then he entered, cursing his sweating palms, and strode deliberately toward the head of the table.

Dancin had risen, his face whitening as he saw Pastor. Pastor stopped, scarcely a foot from the Co-ordinator, stared into his eyes. It was a moment before he realized the sergeant-at-arms was beside him, urging him to turn and face the Council.

Pastor turned and saw that Colonel Fraden was standing, apparently he'd not been in the research block when it was destroyed in yesterday's raid.

"Chief Pastor, it is the privilege but seldom the custom for members of the council to speak before the charges have been made. I would like to take advantage of that privilege."

Pastor nodded his head slightly. This would give him time to compose himself; he was glad the Colonel had broken in. Perhaps the old boy would lay some groundwork for him.

"There have been, in the years of the war, many challenges. Most of them have been successful, for it is hard for a Co-ordinator to defend himself in the midst of a war which we are definitely not winning.

"Many of the Co-ordinators have deserved to go to their deaths. The practice of allowing the challenger to name the new Co-ordinator—and it is usually the challenger himself—has resulted in many Co-ordinators coming to office who were unqualified for the position.

"Co-ordinator Dancin, more than a year ago, successfully challenged and replaced a man who should not have been in office. My own feeling is that Dancin did his people a service both when he removed and when he replaced. I cannot say that I have always agreed with the present Co-ordinator, but I can say that I believe his actions have been for the most part wise, his decisions just, and his overall policies suited to the defence of our system."

Pastor heard a few voices raised in agreement, glanced around the conference table to see heads nodding in approval.

"Therefore," Colonel Fraden continued, "I'd suggest you think carefully before you go so far that you

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cannot withdraw. I think the present members of the Council will not uphold any charges of Inefficiency or Incompetence against the present Co-ordinator."

A number of voices were raised now, and Pastor saw that the sympathies were definitely with Dancin. He smiled grimly.

"I appreciate your comments, Colonel... However, I am not here with the usual charges of Inefficiency and Incompetence. I charge Co-ordinator Dancin with treason and collaboration with the enemy."

There was a gasp or two, sudden in the air, and then silence among the members. Colonel Fraden, Pastor saw, was stunned and shaken, very slowly taking his seat again, as though he had nothing more to say.

It was Dancin who spoke. "You have proof?" His words were only whispers in the air, yet they seemed to carry throughout the hall. There was a stir, as though some members had a growing realization that the charges might be true.

"Yes, I have proof."

"Perhaps—Pastor, if I may speak to you alone—"

It was Colonel Fraden who spoke, without rising, his face turned toward the Co-ordinator, yet his eyes not seeming to see him. "Make your defence before the council."

There were murmurs of agreement.

Dancin started to speak, his face pleading for understanding. Then he hesitated and was silent.

"Your defence, man!" It was Fraden again.

"I have none...I am guilty as charged."

In the silence the sergeant-at arms took hold of Dancin, started to lead him away, unresisting. A council member rose to her feet.

"Wait! Custom calls for immediate death for a successfully challenged Co-ordinator. But circumstances here are unusual. He should be questioned—"

Pastor moved closer to the table, yet he was careful not to get too near the Co-ordinator's chair.

"That won't be required," he assured the Council. "I have all the information which will be needed." He tried to look modest. "After all, as Chief of Council Police it was my duty—"

THE THIRD basement and the fourth door. Pastor looked at it with satisfaction. As much satisfaction, perhaps, as he had gained from entering the Co-ordinator's Residence, a few minutes before, knowing it was his, and that he was mankind's appointed leader.

He'd stalled off questions of the Council, after the death of Dancin. Later he'd give them a report of sorts. The fact that the Outsiders came from another dimension would be held back until he was ready to produce it as the first great accomplishment as Co-ordinator.

He turned to the detectives who followed close behind them, saw they had their weapons ready. He looked down at the small box he carried gingerly in his hand.

"You men understand? You are not to come through that door unless the detector shows that I've dropped this box. If that happens, come in fast, ready to shoot."

The man wearing the earphones nodded. Pastor made sure of his grip on the box. It was held securely, but it could be dropped in an instant. Nothing could prevent him from dropping the box if he needed help.

He pushed open the door and went into the room.

The small basement room held an

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accumulation of machinery which Pastor didn't understand. He saw the desk and chair which Garron had described to him. Over the desk he saw a large loudspeaker.

"Welcome, Co-ordinator Pastor."

He nearly dropped the box, held it with weakened fingers. The voice was the same he had heard in the recording.

"Drop the box if you wish, Co-ordinator... When you came through that door you also came into another dimension. Your signal would not be heard."

Pastor dropped the box, not as a signal, but knowing it was no longer of use to him.

"You're a machine!"

"Yes. Usually it takes a new Co-ordinator some time before he will accept that fact. I am a machine."

"New Co-ordinator? You mean you have had dealings with other Co-ordinators besides Dancin?"

"Yes. With all fifty-seven. You will make fifty-eight."

Pastor laughed shortly. "I'm not a collaborator."

"You will be...They all were... I give you a month, Pastor. You might last one month, or six months. I think a month."

"Thanks...But I think I will make it a life-time job."

"Of course. They've all done that."

"Yes...They were all traitors."

"I'm fighting your people. Pastor. This is an extension of me. There are other extensions hidden throughout the Solar System, others in this dimension we're in now. Every ship that attacks your people is only an extension of me."

"Why? Why does a machine fight us. What can we have that you, a machine, would want?"

"Nothing."

"Then why are you our enemy?"

"I'm not, Pastor. I'm your friend. You have yet to meet your enemies."

"We've been fighting a friend these forty-three years?"

"Yes...Twenty of your generations ago, Pastor, a great race came by your system. They were fleeing for their lives, leaving this galaxy entirely in their flight to get away from their enemies.

"Another race had started conquest of the galaxy, and these people could not stand against them. They were going down to defeat as did all other peoples who tried to defend their systems and their liberties. So my people fled."

"*Your* people?"

"THE PEOPLE who made me. They were much like yourselves. Not human, but intelligent animal life. In their flight they passed this system, investigated, and found your people."

"They found in you humans a race that might someday be able to fight against the Middens and win. They left me here to help you."

"Help?"

"Yes, help, Pastor. This war your people have fought for so long is merely an inoculation. It is giving them a taste of what is to come, so that they might be strong and prepared to fight, and win."

"If what you say is true the help seems rather drastic."

"It must be. I can't help you by warning you, or giving you weapons. I can only help by making you make yourselves strong. Already your weapons are getting better than those which my people had. If it were not for the secret of the dimension, I could not stand against you. That is why the Co-ordinator must see to it that there is no research in that line. I can give you the knowledge of the dimensions

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when you need it. In the meantime you must develop other weapons against the coming of the Middens.

"You say you will not collaborate. All of the Co-ordinators have told me that. They have realized collaboration would mean their eventual deaths because they would be causing themselves to lose the confidence of the Council and be unsupported when they were challenged... I would have liked Dancin to have stayed in office, but— No matter, Pastor, you will collaborate. And die for it."

Pastor closed his eyes and steadied himself. He remembered Dancin going to his death rather than talk. This wasn't what he wanted. He wanted the power and the glory of being Co-ordinator. Not the death that would come after a few short, frightened months.

He knew, even then, that he would collaborate.

THE END

OIL APLENTY!

★ By Milton Matthew ★

SOMETHING that recently has been bothering a lot of people including military men, and the general public who drive cars and have oil heat, is the possibility of running out of oil—the country, that is.

We use the stuff at such a terrific rate that scientists who have examined our potential reserves have shuddered aghast at what might happen in the not remote future. But the picture is changing fast.

It seems that not only have a lot more huge oil deposits been discovered, but the Bureau of Standards has found a practical way to extract the stuff from oil-bearing shale. Shale is a worthless rocky mineral, usually with a few percent of oil clinging to it. The problem has been to get the oil. This has to be done by heating in retorts.

Up until just now this hasn't been economically practical. But a system has been worked out. So we'll soon have all of the stuff we can use. Any future war is going to require enormous amounts for the jet jobs and the motorized units. There'll be enough. At one deposit alone, somewhere in the west, it has been estimated that there's more oil than the U.S. has used since the discovery of the first oil fields back in eighteen-eighties. This means that whatever happens, our cars and our helicopters (we hope) will have enough gas!

CHECKMATE - - -

★ By Sandy Miller ★

FLAREN lounged comfortably at one end of the huge living-room. The fluoro-walls cast a gentle diffused light over the rich furnishing. Flaren reached for the control knob which would switch on the huge vidi-screen opposite his soft padded chair. Abruptly his hand stopped in mid-air.

I won't, he thought. Why should I watch that tripe? Why listen to some moaning bellowing adolescent? Why should I want to see the activities of some quaint uncivilized villagers?

He put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it with a quick nervous gesture: You're jittery, his mind said. You've been under too much pressure. Go back to the simple things. Then the idea struck him. Why not a game of chess.

He got up and strode over to the game table. It was a large flat surface, a boxy structure, equipped with a comfortable chair also. He sat down and touched a stud. At once a chess board swung up, its pieces set in order and ready to play. Flaren pressed another stud and the clicking of a relay told him the set was primed. The machine would give him a good game. He glanced to see if the handicap control was set at "class two"—it was.

He made the conventional Queen's Pawn opening. Magically the other side of the board moved correspondingly. Flaren knew it was a magnetic field beneath the board, but the ghost-like precision of the movement affected him strangely. He shook off a feeling of apprehension and concentrated on the play...

An hour later, he saw the trap he was

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in. The inexorable laws of the game had caught him and the machine made no mistakes—very few at least, for his grade of handicap. Flaren made the move. Swiftly the machine countered. A relay clicked again. The recorder went on softly. "Check King—checkmate!"

Flaren stood up. His arm swept over the table and the little figurines scattered across the room. Calmly he opened the case of the chess-playing machine. Its tubes and relays were exposed. He picked up an ornamental statuette of bronze and with one savage gesture flung it into the array of tubes and wiring. The machine sputtered and squawked, flared up and died.

Flaren punched the button on the vidiscreen. Light groped across its face. The voice of the announcer dulled out, "—pit your wits against the machine. Thirty credits will buy a Maelzel Number eight —set it to your handicap and have fun..." The voice ran on and on. Flaren sat down and cupped his head in his hands. Very softly he began to cry. "Machines," he whispered, "machines..." The words sounded strange in his apartment. "Machines..."

ENEMY SIGHTED - - -

☆ By Walter Lathrop ☆

THE super-submarine, S-701, moved quietly with the icy Arctic currents. Twenty feet overhead the choppy surface of the Bering Sea parted before the knife-edge of the periscope.

"Aw hell, Skipper," Blake, Communications Officer and gin-rummy partner to the commander, said, "let's quit for a while." He flung the deck down on the small metal table.

Franding shrugged: "O.K." He glanced at the chronometer.

"Almost watch-time for you, Andy, right?"

Suddenly there was a pounding on the skipper's door.

"Come in," Franding said. Blake was shrugging into a heaving sweater. The door opened and young Peters rushed in. He was excited and nervous and his sense of discipline seemed lacking.

"Sir," he burst out, "I left Crane at the 'scope. Come on and take a look. Something funny's going on. There's a couple of cruisers off the starboard."

Franding catapulted to his feet and dashed through the door almost bowling over the sailor and closely followed by Blake.

Three seconds later he had his face glued to the periscope. Through the water-washed tube he could see dimly. Not eight hundred yards away, two ships, one a cruiser, the other a small carrier, lay side by side. Even in the choppy weather and the poor visibility, Franding could see small boats plying between the craft, and he could make out dimly the outlines of a huge plane on the flush-decked carrier. There was no mistaking the nationality of the ships either.

Admiral Senton's words came through the back of his mind, even as he automatically stopped the motors of the sub: "Son," the wise Old Man had said, "they may try to pull something. That's why you're on patrol. If you see anything funny, shoot first and ask questions afterward. There won't be any trouble from this end—and if they fail, I doubt if they'll say anything. We expect trouble—real trouble—three years from now—around seventy-one or seventy-two—when they get the hydrogen bomb..."

For five minutes, Franding watched the tableau before him. He dared take no chances. It was clear what was going on. They were planning to throw an atomic bomb! That plane on the deck of the carrier already had its jets warming!

Franding snapped into action. In less than two minutes everything was ready—the sub carried loaded torpedo tubes. In another minute they were on their way. For a moment Franding thought he was too late. The bomber was already starting its run on the carrier deck.

As the torpedoes struck, a cluster of eight, a spread of horror, gusts of flame and explosion rocked through the water. Both carrier and cruiser were almost blown in half and were sinking rapidly.

Instantly Franding threw the sub to the surface. For the bomber was on the way, carrying its cargo of destruction toward sleeping Frisco! The sub emerged and crewmen poured from the hatches toward the guided missiles.

In less than two minutes the deadly winged tubes were in the air. The burning and exploding remnants of the two enemy vessels were ignored although the men were manning the light guns in case they tried to board. Every eye was on the pair of missiles vanishing into the darkening skies.

It took time for them to catch up—but finally they did. The sky burst into a hideous mushroom. The missiles had caught their prey.

Franding went below followed by Blake and the men who had launched the missiles. His face was white and his hands were shaking. "Blake," he said softly, "I'm sending a coded message. Then let's have another game of gin, O.K.?"

Blake's jaunty manner resumed. "Right, skipper," he said as if nothing had happened, "let's relax for a while..."

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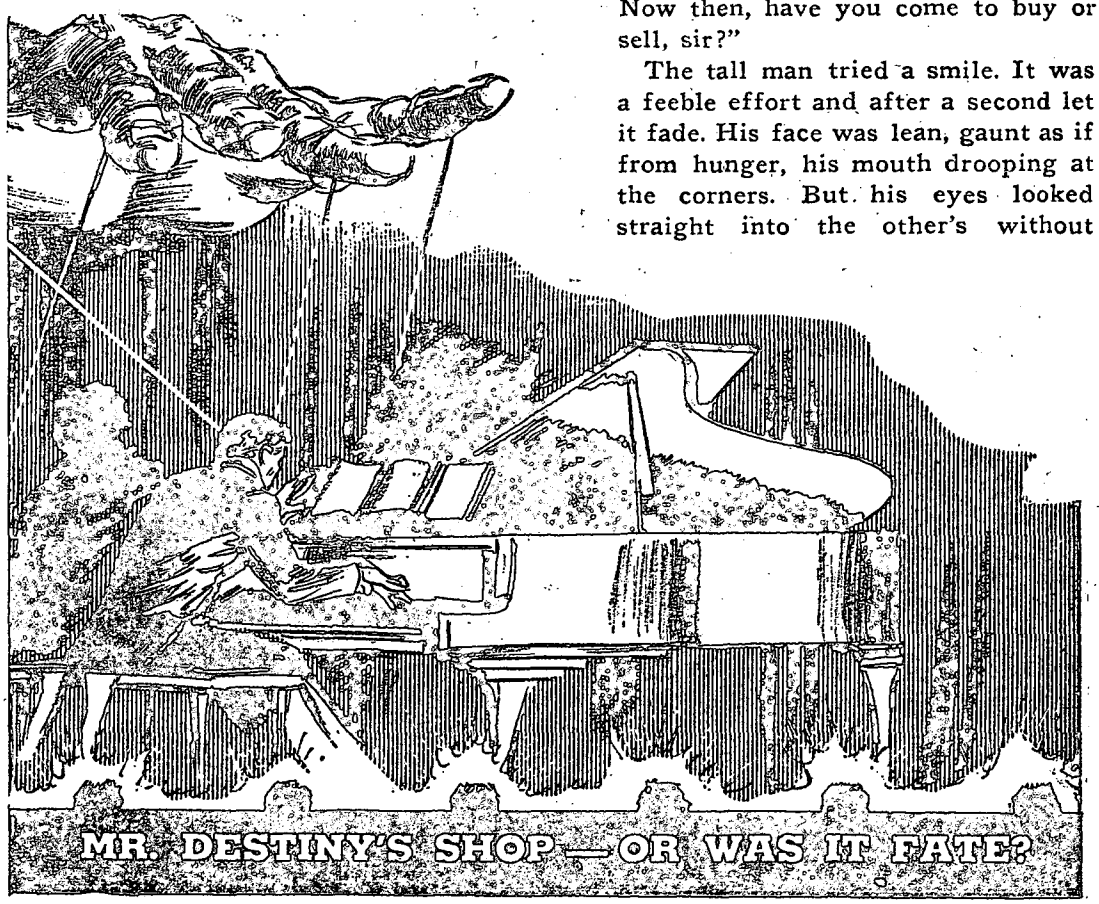
Mr. Destiny Follows Through

By Gilbert Grant

A TINKLING sound announced the door's opening and immediately after a man stepped from behind the beaded-cloth curtain separating the shop from the living quarters in the rear. He was a small man, narrow shoulders lifted high, head bent forward like a bird's. The impression of a bird was heightened by the eyes, beady, unblinking, and bright. His hands washed themselves; they rustled drily, as leaves scraping a picket fence.

"Ah! Good evening, sir. H'mm! *Such* weather. Nasty. *Verynasty*," he ran the two words together. "Quite! Now then, have you come to buy or sell, sir?"

The tall man tried a smile. It was a feeble effort and after a second let it fade. His face was lean, gaunt as if from hunger, his mouth drooping at the corners. But his eyes looked straight into the other's without



MR. DESTINY'S SHOP—OR WAS IT FATE?

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blinking. And his chin was set and hard.

"Don't be uneasy, friend," the shopkeeper continued. "I buy to sell and sell so that I may buy. A simple business, really."

"Yeah. I suppose. I've got something to sell."

"Out with it, my friend. The darkness hides the worth of things. Bring it here where the light will fall on it. Jewels sparkle and gold shows its lustre only when the blessed light strikes. Now then...."

Color heightened the pale thin features of the tall man. His right hand, concealed in one of the pockets of the formless jacket leaped out with an almost involuntary gesture and revealed in its palm a wrist watch. "It's just a nickle-plate job. P.X. Stuff. Not worth much, I'm sure. But..." The words dribbled off into a fear-formed silence.

The other snatched the watch from the hand offering it. "Let Mr. Destiny be the judge of that," he said sharply. "Ah! A watch. The past, present and future. I love them. I have so *many*. One is the watch of the Chinese Emperor, Lao Kwang Shi. He had it made for his number one concubine and presented it to her the morning of the day he had her beheaded for some trivial thing or other. He was *such* an impetuous person. A scholar, though. Very *learned*. Didn't believe in..." He hesitated, smiled apologetically into the tall man's eyes, "...*fate*! I—I hope *you* do..."

"Nuts!" the tall man spat out.

The tiny yellowed hands went up in a simulated gesture of horror and Mr. Destiny's eyes rolled upward. He shook his head sadly. "One mustn't," he spoke in a thin whisper. He sighed, turned and walked to the counter at the far wall and snapped on a light just above it. The tall man followed.

"...From a P. X. you say? Carried through the war, eh?"

"Yeah." The word was stencilled in bitterness. "Yeah. All I got left. I had a medal. A pawnbroker offered me fifty cents for it. The guy who owned the restaurant said he'd give me the seventy-five cent special for it. I was so hungry. So..."

"Hunger always sells cheap. But this lovely thing. How many secrets it whispers of. I shall treasure it. And sometimes, when I grow weary, I will put it to my ear and let it tell me of what it saw and heard. Would fifty dollars make the parting less sorrowful?"

"Fifty dollars! But..."

"Good! A deal. Your money, sir, and a little something besides. This—"

The tall man looked at the circular disk that gleamed with a dull golden color in the light. Strange characters were hammered into the surface. Suddenly the disk was obliterated. Five crisply-new ten-dollar bills had been laid over it. As though fearful the other might change his mind, the tall man shoved bills and disk into his pocket.

"...The characters read, 'Fear nothing. Trust in me. I bring fortune.' I remember well the first time I saw those words. It was during the reign of—"

But the tall man was no longer there.

Mr. Destiny stepped forward and closed the door which had been left ajar by the tall man in his haste to leave. An odd smile broke on the lips of the small man. A smile of inner satisfaction...

HE TOOK THE short flight of stairs in a single bound and almost ran down the slight figure of

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a girl who had suddenly risen before him. He barely closed his fingers on her arm in time.

"O-oh!" it was a sob of relief. Then another, "Oh. Thank you."

"I'm sorry, miss," he said. "Pretty clumsy of me."

"Yes, yes. But-uh, I've got to... He's closed!" there was horror in her voice.

He turned and saw that the windows of the shop below were now dark.

"He was open just a second ago. Come on," he said. He held on to her hands, and turning, he started down the steps again.

He rattled the knob, shook it savagely, while she pounded futiley at the window. Nothing.

"He can't be asleep," the tall man muttered.

"No," she whispered brokenly. "We've got to get him up!"

But the darkness remained.

He turned at the sudden sound of sobbing. "Hey! Hey! What goes, miss? What's wrong?"

As if an echo, came another voice: "Hey! What goes? What's wrong?" And following the words a blinding light fell on them.

She shrank against him, her frail figure nestling close in terror. He looked up, narrowing his eyes against the circle of light and growled: "Shut that thing off! We'll be up."

The light went off.

"All right, you two. Come up here," the thick voice said. He was a policeman, still in his raincoat although the rain had stopped. He looked stolidly at them, waiting an answer to his questions.

"We saw a light as we came up and by the time we got down the steps it went out. So we knocked and shook the knob trying to get the man's attention," the tall man explained.

"No use," the policeman said. "I seen it happen time and time again. The old guy never opens up once the lights go out. Try him in the mornin'. Night folks."

It was a polite way of saying, beat it.

The tall man took the hint. Taking her arm under his he started off at a brisk walk. Not until they had put distance between themselves and the policeman did he break the silence.

"All right, miss. Out with it. You're in trouble. Maybe I can help."

Her speech had the soft slurring of the south. "I was there only an hour ago. He said not to rush, that there would be someone to help me. I guess he forgot."

"I see," the other said, not seeing at all. "You wanted to buy something...?"

She held her free hand out. A golden band encircled the third finger. "I was going to sell him this." She continued before he could break in, "My mother's. All I had left to sell..."

He didn't know why he felt a rush of relief on learning the ring was not hers. But suddenly the pressure the sight of the band had brought to his heart, lessened. "Things tough, eh? Kinda down, eh? Like I was a while ago?" He snapped his fingers. "Breaks come this fast sometimes. Now me, I always feel better when I got a steak in me. Steak, potatoes, salad, pie, apple of course, and a nice dish of ice cream to follow. How does that sound?"

"Heavenly..."

"And here we are at Joe's, the poor man's Steak House. Shall we dine?"

Her tremulous smile was answer enough...

HER NAME was Hallie Fromm and his Tom Gaynor. The park

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was not far off. The moon was free of clouds and of a sudden summer was in the air. There seemed nothing better to do than stroll in the park after their meal. They had spoken little while eating, neither pretending any interest other than in the food served them.

"Uh, Hallie. . ."

"Yes, Tom?"

"I don't want to sound nosy. So don't be a goon, Tom Gaynor and just be quiet!"

She laughed and he stopped her. "Do that again," he said.

"Why?"

"I liked it."

She only smiled and presently began to talk: "It was the nicest thing ever done to me, that dinner. It's different with a man. I mean begging. I know that all day I was fighting myself. I guess when a person gets so hungry. . ."

"Forget it!" he said it fiercely, angrily. "Forget it."

They walked in silence for a moment under the weeping arches of trees. Suddenly she put her hand out. "I-I'm very tired, Tom. Let's sit for a moment."

They found a bench a few feet off and sank into its hard embrace as though the wooden slats were the softest of down pillows. She leaned her head back and he studied her small still features. There was nothing about any single one to make one look twice but altogether they made a pleasing effect. Her eyes were her best features. Oval in shape, brown in color, they were large and well-shaped and oddly intent in look.

Abruptly she turned toward him her eyes wide and looking off into personal distances: "The hills are full of color now. Spring comes early to the mountain country. The women are starting to plan things; I can see them, gathered at Sister Ellie Rand's house. 'Lympia Tavish keeps demanding preacher Jud Simpkins be there, but no one pays her heed; they all know she's been wearin' her heart on her sleeve for him for the past ten years. Then Ellie'll ask me to sing, of course. . . Only this time I won't be there, Tom—"

"You sing?"

It was as if she hadn't heard: "Poor Uncle Gordie. He worked so hard. And after Mother died he took me in. It was like being his daughter. 'Hallie,' he used to say. 'Singin' for the Saturday night gatherin's all right. But there's better things for your voice. An' I'll make 'em come true. Yo're going to Chicago an' study, that's what.' He did too. Saved and scrimped and paid my way through singing school. Then he died. . ."

"That's what you like, singing, hunh? Mountain songs and spirituals. I like them too," he said.

"At school they told me to forget the songs I knew. They said my voice was for other things. Opera, the stage. They said I should sing like this. . ." Her voice lifted in a sudden high note, held for a moment then dropped suddenly. ". . .Not like this. . ." her voice became a husky thing, low, intimate, telling of the love of a mountain girl for her man.

HE LISTENED, enthralled. From the first high note he knew her voice as a big one, yet not operatic, perhaps. Not strong enough, not enough power. But this folk song, and the way she sang it. Ah! That was something else.

"Hallie. Did you ever try to sing for anyone?"

"Oh, yes. Time and time again. One thing or another put me off. But always behind it all the fact was I

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just wasn't good enough."

"For opera you're not," he was blunt. "Not even for some opperetta music. But folk singing. Hah. I'd like to handle you. Hey! What an idea! The best I've ever had."

She looked at him with a speculative glance. He colored suddenly under the appraising stare. And knew how pitiful the words were. He remembered his clothes, the hunted, starved look of him, and smiled in crook-lipped self-derision. He couldn't handle worms! His head fell forward against his chest. He dug his hands deeply into his trouser pockets. And felt the small fold of bills, the balance of what was left of the fifty dollars.

He *could* help her, though, he realized.

He started to withdraw his hand and saw the stooped figure of a small man pass. The stooped figure was almost at the curve of a bend before Tom remembered it. The man who owned the shop! Then with the remembrance of the man came also the thought of the good-luck piece he had been given. He pulled it out and examined it. He could make out the engraved characters. What did they say? 'Fear nothing. Trust in me. I bring fortune'.

"Hallie..."

"Yes...?"

"Do you believe in yourself?"

"I-I'm not sure anymore."

"Take a look at me. What do you see?"

"I see a good man."

"No, no! I mean..."

She stopped him: "I don't know what you mean. I only know what I see. Tom. I'm not a city girl. Don't misunderstand. It's just that I'm mountain folk, Tennessee mountain girl. We don't have different values. It's just that they're more simple. You're good or you're not. You're good, Tom. I'd trust you with my life."

He felt a sweep of awe take hold of him at the words. She'd trust him with her life. But what had he done to deserve such trust? Bought her a meal...? He shook his head. Maybe he needed straightening out? Maybe ...? Damn right he did!

"Then start trusting," he spoke with harsh abruptness. "I'm going to do things for you, Hallie. Make a somebody of you. First, are you staying any place in particular?"

She told him where; she owed a week's rent. That was why she had gone to sell the ring. The man had promised her enough to pay her rent. Twelve dollars.

"Okay. Here's twenty-four bucks, last week's and a week in advance. I'll take you home and pick you up around noon. H'm. Here's another five .. no, better ten. Breakfast and maybe you might need something. We're going to see people. People who are going to hear you sing, and after, give you a job. How does that sound?"

Her lips were cool, and soft and sweet. It was the answer he didn't expect. But it satisfied more than any other....

SHE LOOKED at him and saw he had shaved. His suit had been pressed. He had even bought a tie and shirt; they wore the unmistakable look of newness.

"Say. I'd never have thought of that, but you're wearing just the dress that'll fit the act," he said. "Had breakfast?"

"Hours ago. There's some change..." She held her hand out to him. There was nine dollars and seventy-five cents in the palm.

"Where'd you eat, in a bird shop?

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Look, Hallie! You should know people can't sing when the insides are empty. Come on. We've..."

"I'm too excited to eat," she said. "Later, maybe. Not now."

He understood. "Sure. I just didn't want you getting sick or something. We're off."

Tom hadn't noticed how close to Mr. Destiny's shop they were. As they strolled along he became aware of the fact they would pass it.

"What a difference, last night and now," he said as they approached the shop. "Y'know, that old man must be a little touched. Fifty dollars for the watch I gave him... Found money."

They were abreast of the shop and as though compelled to, looked down. A narrow face, whose beady eyes were bright and steady, was pressed against the grimed windows. Mr. Destiny. He saw them and waved for them to come down. Tom bit his lip. The old boy had been pretty gabby, he remembered. But Hallie was smiling and already stepping downward. He followed.

"Ah! There you are my dear," the old man was saying as he ushered them into the shop. Daylight made it less g l a m o r o u s, more dingy-looking, bare and oddly forlorn. "I'm so sorry. I remembered too late... Forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive," she smiled her sweetest smile. "Maybe it turned out for the best?"

"It always does," Mr. Destiny said. "And you, how different. A new tie..becoming with the shirt you purchased. Yes. You *do* look different, young man. For the better, I can say."

"Thanks to you," Tom said. "I've got to say, though, that I don't see how you can make money. Fifty dollars..."

Mr. Destiny's shoulders heaved slightly. They almost touched his ears. He smiled his apology for not being a better business man. "Money? It has its place, I suppose. But...."

The mention of money brought Tom's mind to the business he and Hallie had in mind. Of course Fabian's did not open until late. But the people Tom wanted to see should be there now. He thought, better get Hallie away from this.

"Hallie," he turned toward her and winked. "It's getting late."

It was Mr. Destiny who answered, however: "Nothing is ever late or early. Time moves in measured pace. Only humans rush. What will be will wait until you come." He sighed, tapped his fingers together, and nodded happily. "Yes. I like that. Time moves in measured pace. *Verygood.* Ah. But I must *not* keep you too long. Another moment, that's all—" He turned with a surprising swiftness and fairly ran through the beaded-cloth curtain.

HE RETURNED almost immediately. There was something in his hand. He held it out to Hallie and said: "Something for you, my dear. A long-departed relative of yours made it. They were artisans, those hill people."

It was a miniature spinning wheel. Made of wood and bearing the unmistakable stamp of hand work.

Hallie started to object but Mr. Destiny waved the objections aside. "*Now, now,* my dear! A small return, indeed, for the pleasure of hearing you sing. I have heard it said it will bring... But there is no need to tell *you* this. You are the last of the hill-people. They will never forget you or let you come to harm. Ha-ha! *Oh, dear!* How I go on. And Tom here is fairly *fretting* to be off. Then off

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with you both. Quickly! Before I am reminded of other things."

They were at the door when Hallie suddenly turned and darted back and before Mr. Destiny could stir, had planted a quick kiss on his cheek. There was such a sad smile on his lips as he closed the door after them.

"What a queer bird he is," Tom said. "I guess when you get to be his age you start to imagine things. Like knowing your relatives."

She wasn't listening. Her mind was on far-off things. He gave her a quick glance from the corner of his eye and felt his pulses quicken. She was so-so, he was at a loss for a word, and groped for one in his mind. He wondered why, wraith-like, came to it. He looked down at the miniature and noticed how wondrously exact the carving and details were. The artisan had even fashioned a tiny spindle on which a few threads of wool were wound....

"You haven't even asked me where I'm taking you," he said.

She started and the far-away look was replaced by one of bewilderment, as if she had been awakened from a dream.

"Hallie!" he teased her. "You're a sleepwalker."

"I'm sorry, Tom," she said. "But Mr. Destiny's talking brought my Uncle to mind."

He shook his head. "That's the past, Hallie," he said. "I'm taking you to your future."

"It's funny," she said. "But when I'm even near Mr. Destiny I think of the strangest things. They seem to be so real. Especially when he talks of the hill-people, as he calls them. It's as though they were all standing around and listening."

"Maybe that's the reason he gave you the miniature," Tom joked. "Thought perhaps it would conjure them up."

"Don't laugh!" she was suddenly breathless. "They tell strange tales about them in the hills. Funny ones, too. But only sometimes. They believed in witches and..."

"Hallie!" he shook her gently. "Bogey stories. I'm surprised."

She shuddered, recovered and suddenly smiled. "You're right."

"Of course I am. Now. We're going to Ed Fabian's. No bottom for you. The top, from the very beginning."

Ed Fabian's on State Street was a combination steak house and nite club. Fabian paid high for talent. There was a reason for it. The upstairs rooms. Fabian charged high prices. The upstairs rooms again. He wasn't interested in anyone unless they had money. Only people with money could go upstairs. Crap, roulette and poker came high there.

Tom held the door open for her and followed her into the dim coolness of the lobby. They could hear the muted sounds of music from beyond the leather-faced inside doors. There was an elevator to their right. A man in shirt sleeves was talking to the girl who ran it. They looked at the two standing just inside the lobby doors with cool appraising looks.

"Not open, folks," the man said. "Six o'clock...."

"I'd like to see the manager," Tom said.

"Joe? Through those doors and back. I think he's busy with Trilby Hill."

Tom nodded his thanks and took the lead.

THE BANDSTAND was from wall to wall and projected onto the floor for a good twenty feet. A glassed-in bar was to their left just beyond the inside doors. The floor

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was quite large and square. The stacked chairs and bare tables had an air of tired expectancy about them. There were eight men and a woman grouped about a grand piano on the stand. The woman was in slacks and sweater. She had small breasts and rather wide flat hips. Her breasts looked like apples wrapped in wool.

The woman was singing when they entered. Suddenly she stopped. "Now what d'ya say, fellas?" she demanded in a raucous voice. "Off-beat. Off-beat! I sound like I'm peddling fish or something. And never mind the wisecracks, Jack. It's tough enough making a living this way."

There was laughter which was stilled as they caught sight of Tom and Hallie. The woman, seeing the others staring, turned and gave the girl a frank look of appraisal. Her lip curled in a grin.

"Help you folks?" she asked.

"Yes. We're looking for someone named Joe," Tom replied.

"Trellis...? He was here a second ago. There he is..."

A chunky man in shirt and slacks stepped from an open door to the left of the bandstand. His swarthy skin was made more so by the blue-black look to his close-shaved face. He was balding and middle-aged. But he moved briskly and his eyes, Tom saw when Trellis stopped before them, were needle-sharp.

"Yeah?" Trellis didn't waste words. "What's on your mind?"

"A job. Singing," Tom said.

"Benny the Bum's using singing waiters, Jack," Trellis said. "You got a wrong steer."

"Not me. The girl."

"Yeah? Sings, huh? Look, Jack. The amateur hour is Moore's caper, not Ed Fabian's. So why don't you try the radio?"

"So why don't you let her sing?" Tom asked.

Trellis gurgled laughter and shook his head. "I ain't got the time. I'm a busy guy. I got work to do. The madam up there's leaving Sunday. Hollywood's got her number, and they can have it. So we got to find someone to fill the last two weeks. An' you want me to listen to this broad sing? Some other time, huh?"

Tom dug deep into his pockets. Damn! He *had* to get this man to listen to her. His fingers felt the good-luck piece. *Don't fail me now,* he thought desperately. He turned to look at Hallie and saw she was no longer at his side. He turned again quickly and saw Hallie was now on the bandstand. She and Trilby Hill were talking in low tones. The trumpet man was blowing soft riffs, the pianist was practicing runs and the other men were looking bored or interested whatever their feelings ran.

"Joe," Trilby Hill said drily. "Let her sing."

"What for?"

"F'r the kick. Okay?"

"Okay. But it's your kick not mine. I ain't got time to listen."

"Oh, I don't know, Joe," said a man who had suddenly stepped from the dimness of the darkened bar. He came forward the ten steps which separated him from the two men standing before the bandstand. He was tall, though not so tall as Tom: heavier, yet not fat. He was dressed in a double-breasted suit, a fine pin stripe on blue cheviot. His tie matched perfectly, his face was immaculately groomed, his hair worn slick, was dark with greying edges along the sides and back. "Let the chick sing, Joe. Go ahead, miss..."

From the instant attention paid him Tom guessed this was Ed Fabian himself. Fabian pulled a platinum cigarette case from behind the

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colored display kerchief in his breast pocket, lit a cigarette and smiled through the small cloud of smoke he blew.

HALLIE WAS whispering to the pianist. He kept shaking his head. She turned away and looked pleadingly toward Tom. "He-he doesn't know any of the songs," she said.

"Sure he does," Fabian said. And suddenly Tom got it. It was a gag. There was laughter deep in the man's voice.

"Never mind," Tom found himself saying. "I know them, Hallie."

He rubbed his hands together in a quick nervous gesture. His upper teeth kept chewing at his lower lip. The keys seemed to stretch endlessly, black and white; eighty-eight, ninety-eight, one hundred and eight ... He heard her voice as from a distance. She was telling him to play the song she had sung the night before. And his fingers were moving over the keys. Presently they were more sure. He struck a chord, gave her a quick smile and whispered, "I've got the key. Sixteen bars of introduction."

She nodded, turned and faced the two men below. But just as Tom finished the introduction, the trumpet man said: "Hey! Gotta use a mike, sister. You ain't built like Kate Smith, you know."

Her mouth was open. It remained that way as laughter leaped from one to another of those listening. Only Trilby Hill was silent. But not for long.

"What's so funny? Give the kid a break. Go on, honey. Let 'em have it. But don't you need a mike?"

"No!" Tom's voice exploded sharply. "No mike. Not for her."

Once more he went through the introduction. Again she opened her lips. The gentle lament of the mountain girl in search of her lover filled the air. She sang with eyes closed, swaying to and fro with the music. Suddenly her voice died away on the last note. There was a startled silence. Then Tom broke into another tune, a very old folk song, sung only in the hill country of Tennessee. Once more she sang. As the soft husky voice sang the words, Tom felt a chill strike him. For the shortest second he imagined the strangest thing. That there were men in boots and jeans, lean men, tall men, bearded and wearing slouch hats, suddenly dancing to the tune. Dancing with women in sunbonnets, lean women, gaunt-faced women, women in calico....

Abruptly a shrill whistle of awe cut the silence following the song. It was the trumpet player. "Terrif. But terrif! I gotta learn that number."

It was the accolade, the acknowledgment of her genius. The others crowded about her. Only the piano player held aloof. A worried frown creased his forehead. He moved slowly forward until he was standing beside Tom. "Y'know, Jack, I don't dig you now, but I used to. Uh, hunh! You ain't from right now. No. I dug you some time ago. Give me a chance, Jack. I'll label you."

Tom's eyes burned holes into the sleepy grey ones looking down at him. The piano player backed away in startled fright. Abruptly Tom slid from the stool and crossed over in front of Hallie.

"What do you say, Mr. Fabian? Did she sell you?"

"I'll buy her. What's her name?"

"Hallie Fromm," Tom said. And only he heard the whispered thread of her voice when someone wisecracked, "From where?" She said,

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"...Over the mountain..."

"All right boys," Trellis said, as if sensing something in Fabian's manner. "Fold it up and put it away. Until eight..."

FABIAN motioned for Tom and Hallie to follow him. He led them to his office. There was none of the opulence, the garishness of the nite club in his office. It was cold, business-like. A pair of crackle-brown files stood head high in one corner. The steel door of a large safe projected from a side wall. Tom could see the warning label. It said that only Brinks could open the safe. A wide, flat-topped desk angled two corners. Fabian seated himself behind the desk and waved his hand for the two to sit.

"I'll buy her," he said again.

"Us," Tom said.

"Okay. She's got to have an accompanist. Eight week contract with option. All right with you?"

"Sounds good. How much?"

"Grand a week..both of you. If you hit, four weeks at two grand and four more at three."

"It's a deal."

Fabian smiled. He had nice teeth. The uppers were false but beautifully made. The teeth were nice, Tom decided, but the smile wasn't. Too much teeth, not enough humor. Fabian asked him his name and Tom told him.

"Y'know," Fabian leaned back until the chair creaked under his weight. "You're either very smart or very lucky. Maybe both."

"Why?"

"You're no stranger to booking. You know I don't work anything but fine acts in here. You've been around. Nobody walks into a place like this and gets auditions."

"I know," Tom agreed. "I just felt...*lucky!*"

"Believe in luck, eh?" Fabian asked.

"Lately. Very much."

"Then let's get straight on something, Gaynor. I run some games upstairs. It's a house rule that anyone can play, including the help. You win or lose on your own, understand?"

"Perfectly. No advances on gambling losses..."

"Or any other kind. No advances, period."

"...Except this. We'll need half our first week's salary."

Fabian started to voice a protest but changed his mind. He opened one of the drawers instead and pulled out a flat steel cash box. He flipped the lid open and extracted a packet of money wrapped in a paper folder. He counted out ten bills and slid them over to Tom. "Five hundred. You've got four days. Trilby goes out Sunday night. But I'll want you here Sunday night too. The girl needs an introduction. I'll leave it to you and Joe. Work out a good act."

Tom nodded, pocketed the money, and said: "We'll knock them dead. Don't worry. Well, Hallie, let's be on our way. Things to do."

IT WAS A moneyed crowd. Trilby Hill was a very popular *chanteuse*. And her farewell appearance at Ed Fabian's drew the largest audience of the season. She sang raucously, risque songs they had heard before and loved. She was earthy and without pretense. Tom and Hallie, seated at a far table, watched her and loved every song, every movement she made. She had been like a rock against which Hallie had leaned, staunch and protecting against the sometimes rough jibes of the orchestra men. And she had

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taught Hallie the inestimable value of poise under trying circumstances. There were tears in Hallie's eyes as Trilby finished her last song.

"...Okay, folks! We've been palsy for a long time," Trilby raised her hands for attention. "So Trilby goes to greener pastures. And I mean greener, especially where the lettuce grows in bigger bundles. Got it? Ha-ha! A funny. But anyway, she's agoin. And someone else is acomin' to Ed's joint. Matter of fact she's here tonight. A little girl the likes of which you've never heard before. Good...? But wait till you hear. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Hallie Fromm..."

The spotlight bathed Hallie in its brilliant glow, made her look like a small girl in the specially-designed gown Tom had spent two hundred dollars on. Her hair was in pigtails and her face bore only a trace of make-up.

"Okay, honey. Onstage," Trilby said. She extended a hand for Hallie, gave her a quick peck on the cheek and whispered, "Do it like as if there was no one here. Luck, baby!"

The audience was intent on the girl. No one noticed Tom inconspicuous at the piano. He looked about, noticed Fabian standing at the doors at the rear, saw the musicians off-stage and turned again to look at Hallie. And for the first time noticed that her fingers were playing with the miniature spinning wheel she had received from Mr. Destiny. So she had her good-luck piece also. He slid his fingers into his trouser pocket and caressed the coin. Then she was looking toward him and he let his fingers ramble over the keys for a second or two.

They wouldn't let her go. She took six encores. There were tears in her eyes when Trilby Hill ran on stage.

"Gotta save her voice, folks," Trilby said. "Don't worry. She'll be here for a long time, I can tell you. Now..."

But the crowd begged one more song. Hallie gave in to it. She turned to Tom and whispered, "What'll it be, Tom?"

Without hesitation, he said, "'Over The Mountain'."

He kept his eyes on the spinning wheel in her fingers. It fascinated him. It seemed alive. He would have sworn the spindle was moving. There was a sudden chill in the air, a tingling at his spine, a tightness in his belly. He turned slowly and looked out at the crowd below.

Bearded men, in slouch hats; tall men, lean, gaunt, dressed in homespun and jeans. And seated at their sides, women in calico, angular women, thin-faced, sharp-featured, strong-minded women. They were happy and carefree and their eyes were bright and their lips sang the chorus, soundlessly...

His fingers crashed out the last chord in wild protest. For a startled moment Hallie's eyes met his. Then he was dashing from the stage.

"WHAT THE hell kind of an idea was that?" Ed Fabian growled. "You almost spoiled the show."

Tom was miserable. He had chewed a blister on his lower lip. Hallie watched him from the leather couch with worried eyes. Fabian was pale with anger.

"Look, mister," Fabian continued. "I told you piano players are a dime a dozen. I don't go for that temperament deal, even from my stars. Get it?"

"I said I was sorry!" Tom growled. But his eyes begged forgiveness from her.

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Mr. Fabian," Hallie broke in before the other could continue. "I think Tim isn't wholly to blame. He worked very hard rehearsing, and I know that when he should have been sleeping he was writing arrangements for me."

She spoke the truth. But Tom knew that wasn't the reason he had left the stage in such panic-striken haste. The reason she gave seemed to satisfy Fabian, however. The thunder left his brow and presently he was smiling again. He stepped over to the girl, patted her shoulder and said: "I've got an idea you're going to be here a long time, honey. Well. No show tomorrow. Tuesday the boys from the papers and trade sheets will be on hand. But I don't think we have to worry. Or do we, Gaynor?"

"No-o," Tom said wearily. "From now on no worries."

They started to leave when Fabian halted them. "Going without your pay?"

"You mean...?" Tom was puzzled.

"Sunday night's pay night. You and Hallie get the other half of the grand."

"I'll take it," Tom said.

"You'll take it? What's the matter? Doesn't she get any of it?"

Hallie looked bewildered. "But of course Tom will take it," she said. "Why shouldn't he?"

Fabian's shoulders heaved in the custom-fitted dinner jacket. He pulled out the cash box and slid across the crisp bills. Tom put them in his pocket without looking at them and took Hallie's arm.

"See you Tuesday," he said. And to Hallie, after the door closed on Fabian, "I've got something to do. Be a sweet kid and grab a cab and go to your hotel. Don't mind, do you?"

She blew him a kiss from the elevator door...

THE CHANT of the stickman was the only human sound: "...Acey-deucey; crap! Same man shootin'. Lay your bets..." And then the clicking sound of chips on the board.

Tom bit his lip. The dice *had* to get hot! He shoved the last of his chips on the 'pass' line, shook the cubes hard and threw them against the rail. Boxcars! Another crap. He grunted sourly, turned and shoved his way through the crowd pressed against the crap table.

Five hundred bucks shot to hell, he thought. *Her money. Not mine. Her's! A good thing she's got the dough that was left after the dress and suit were bought.*

"No luck, Gaynor?" a voice stopped him in his blind walk to the elevator.

It was Fabian.

"How the hell do you know?"

"I can spot a loser a mile away. Especially a bad loser."

"Oh. I thought maybe a guy didn't stand a chance of winning in this house."

Fabian's eyes blazed. The anger died and a drowsy look came into his eyes. His lips curled in sardonic humor. "You got a fast lip, fella. Could be I might have to slow it down."

"Could be. Not you, though."

"Probably not. But don't worry. When the time comes, I'll see to it that you're *well* taken care of."

"I'll hold my breath till then."

It wasn't until Tom was in the elevator that he remembered Fabian had been talking to the piano player in the band at the time...

* * *

She hadn't noticed it until weeks had gone by. Then she couldn't help

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it. He seemed to be losing weight; his clothes hung loosely on his frame, and his face was gaunt, hollow-cheeked, haggard-eyed. More, he seemed suddenly slovenly. Now and then he didn't shave. And once he had appeared on the stage without a tie.

It was the day after the tie incident. Tom had called for Hallie, as usual, for their brunch. He needed a shave and his eyes were red-rimmed, as though from lack of sleep.

"Tom," she began hesitantly. "I've never mixed in your affairs. And maybe I shouldn't now. But, well I can't help it. Is there something wrong?"

It was as though she had touched him with a hot iron. He took a step to the side, looked at her with eyes which showed panic, pain and fear inextricably mixed. "What do you mean? There's nothing wrong! Or maybe you'd like to know what's happening to the dough?"

She stopped dead. Unbidden anger sharpened her voice: "All right then. It wasn't what I meant. But since you've brought it up. Just what have you been doing with the money. Certainly the hundred dollars a week isn't my share."

"So! All that talk about trusting me was just talk, eh? Yeah! You trust me. Far as you can throw me. Well. Don't worry. You'll get it. Every last penny. See...?"

Her eyes were wide in hurt. Her lips quivered and suddenly she was running down the street. He called to her but his voice was a dry whisper in his throat. He moved slowly, head bent, eyes half-closed in hidden pain.

"Young man," a voice panted up at him. "Oh, dear! I thought you were going to drag me across town."

For a second or two Tom didn't recognize the pinched features, the bright beady eyes, the tiny figure of Mr. Destiny. When he did he tried to shake off the fingers holding so tightly to the cloth of his jacket.

"So overwrought. *Comecome,* Tom, my boy. It isn't seemly, this struggling. And so useless. Now then. That's better..."

Tom shook himself. Shook the bitterness out of his eyes and from his lips. He came to a sudden decision. It was as though fate... He gave the little man at his shoulder a sharp glance. Fate... But he had once said he didn't believe in fate. "Yeah," he said softly. "Yeah. I think maybe you and I ought to have a talk."

"Good! I was *hoping* you would say that. I was preparing a cup of tea. Join me...?"

NOT A thing had changed. Not even the wiping of the dust from the cases. Tom fell wearily into the chair Mr. Destiny offered.

"You seem troubled, my boy," the old man said as he busied himself with the pouring. "H'mm! *Very-troubled.* I'm an old man. Seen a great deal. *Greatdeal.* Always helps to talk it over. Out with it!"

"Who are you?" Tom asked. The world seemed to stand still while the little old man with the bright beady eyes stopped pouring.

"Why, I'm Mr. Destiny. The man who buys, so that he may sell. A bad business, really. I make very little money at it, to tell the truth. Aah! Money. So much trouble because of it. Lover's quarrels...."

"That's it!" Tom burst out. "You knew. Yet you weren't there. You knew we quarreled. Like you knew my name. I'd never told you. Like you knew all about Hallie. Like you know about the spinning wheel and

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the *Hill-people* who come to Ed Fabian's every night. They used to smile and laugh. Now they sit and just look at me. Why do they look at me? As though they were waiting for something? Why must I play that song, 'Over The Mountain' for Hallie's last encore? Why?"

The old man's smile was a little tired, a little sad, but patient. He had not stopped his pouring of the tea while Tom was in his tirade. Now he finished, shoved over one cup before Tom and seated himself across from the other. He lifted the cup, drained it and put it down. His usually quick voice, deepened, slowed in measured speech: "When the last of the skein is spun from the spindle the garment Fate is weaving will be complete. There was a beginning and she is the end. But there had to be an instrument. Our paths crossed as it was ordained. So you must walk it to the end. *They* will protect her to the very last. And when their work is done they will fade into the mists from which they appear, never to come again. But you, Tom, must work your way alone, unaided, until the light of what is at your side becomes visible. Now, if you will excuse me? I am tired..."

The beaded-cloth curtains rustled as Mr. Destiny parted them and stepped past...

THE APPLAUSE died down, the lights came on and people stepped onto the dance floor as the band took over, after Hallie's last encore. Tom stepped away from the doors and waited for Hallie to come out. He paid no attention to the man who was at her side.

"Hallie, I'm sorry. But something happened..."

"Yes, Tom. I know. It happened long ago. So long ago. And now it's all over. Please, Tom. Mr. Fabian is waiting for me."

"Sure, Jack," the man at her side suddenly said. "The boss is waiting for her. Uh, hunh! And he don't like waiting..."

It was too late to stop her. She had stepped into the elevator before he could follow.

"...Yeah. I knew I dug you. Took me a while. But I figgered I'd seen that hung-up pan of yours before. Thomas Gaynor Hardin. The guy who was barred from the concert stage. For gambling with advances and not keeping playing dates. A petty thief. A real hung-up Joe."

Abruptly many things became clear to Tom. This man was the piano player, the one who had first mentioned he looked familiar. The one who had been at Fabian's side the first night Tom had shot crap. He was dressed in tails...

"You played for Hallie, tonight?" Tom asked softly.

"Yep. And gonna *keep* playin' for her. Fabian's say-so."

"I see. I suppose you told Fabian about my past?"

"Look, Jack," the other said gently, as though Tom were being stupid. "You had a good gig. But you loused it up. Am I supposed to be a stupe too?"

"You told Fabian. I wondered why he changed his mind about giving me advances. He knew I'd play craps. So he gave me all the advances I wanted. The dice were crooked so he stood to lose nothing. And I fell in. Like a baby fresh from the cradle. Uh, hunh! No wonder the *hill-people* stopped smiling. I was hurting Hallie. I, who love her. Well. Maybe it's not too late..."

He could hear the murmur of voices beyond the panelled door. He rapped and Fabian called for him to

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enter. From the man's look of surprise he hadn't expected the caller to be Tom. Hallie, white-faced and tense was seated by the desk.

"Oh. It's you," Fabian said shortly. "Well. Maybe it's to the good. I was just telling Hallie about the advances you took."

"He's telling the truth," Tom said quietly. "I took all that money and gambled it away. It was my vice in the long ago. I thought I'd gotten rid of it. Hah! Then I got that lucky piece from Mr. Destiny. It worked. So I thought I'd really put it to use. Lucky piece! Junk..." He slipped the disk from his pocket and tossed it on the desk. It struck and something fell away from one edge.

Fabian picked it up and peeled off what was a heavy piece of foil. Tom watched him with lifted brows. Abruptly Fabian burst into laughter. "Lucky piece was it? Get this. 'Gibson's Tavern. Good for one buck in trade'. Here. Maybe you'll need it."

But Tom was looking at the girl. The disk fell at his feet. "Hallie. Maybe it's too late. I'm hoping it isn't. I love you. I loved you from the moment when we sat on that park bench. I've done you wrong and to say that I'll make it up would be foolish. You just don't hurt people you love. But this money I've taken from you. I'll return every cent of it. Every cent."

He wasn't sure. But he thought he had read forgiveness in her eyes as he turned from them and walked through the open door...

TOM KNEW what he had in mind to do was going to be the most difficult he had ever attempted. He realized the only way to make enough money to repay Hallie was to return to the concert stage. But he had betrayed his agents, the concert impressarios and his public. Their memories were long. Could he do it? He'd damn well try, anyway, he thought, as he walked down the darkened streets.

It wasn't until he was a block from it that he became conscious the street he was on was also that on which Mr. Destiny had his shop. He ran quickly down the stairs. The shop was in darkness, but he expected it to be. He peered through the window, trying to pierce the darkness within. Hopelessly. He thought that if he could shake the door hard enough the bell might tinkle and awake Mr. Destiny.

The door was open.

Tom snapped the light switch on and walked back, through the beaded-cloth curtains. There was nothing beyond. Nothing but the walls. Not a bed or a chair or even the trace of anything in the dust that covered the floor. It was dust which had never been violated... He turned and ran from the room, the shop, as though from fear and horror. Nor did he stop until he sank from exhaustion on a bench in the park.

He sat, head buried in hands, and tried to puzzle it out. Yet he knew it was impossible. Mr. Destiny had been flesh and blood. He had felt his touch on the cloth of his jacket. Those hadn't been phantom fingers which had placed the disk in his hand. Then where was Mr. Destiny? And who was going to answer the one question Tom wanted answered? How was it Tom saw the *hill-people?*

Did the answer lay in Mr. Destiny's words, "...There had to be an instrument"? Did they mean the piano was the instrument, or Tom? He thought back on the last encore Hallie had sung. It had been Over The Mountain. And remembered that for

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the first time he hadn't seen the *hill-people*.

Then it wasn't the piano.

"...When the last of the skein is spun from the spindle the garment Fate is weaving will be complete...." The words were branded on his brain. The spindle on the miniature spinning wheel never moved until the song, Over The Mountain was played. Tom knew then he had to make good. For otherwise the *hill-people* could not protect her. He had to make good so that he could return and play for her.

For he had known for a long time Ed Fabian wanted her.

THE ROAD back for Tom was incredibly hard. It took more than just courage. It took the remembrance of the trust she had placed in him to light his way. And one by one he got over the obstacles and hindrances. One by one he broke down the suspicions until at last he was given the chance to play again.

Though he did not see Hallie he saw someone who saw her every night. The little fat trumpet player who had been the first to acknowledge her genius. Tom saw him often. And learned that all was not well. The trumpet player's name was Billy Sims.

"Haggerty's real crazy. You know, be-bop," Billy said. He ain't a long-hair like you, Tom. Don't get me wrong. There's nothing wrong with long-hair. Matter of fact Hallie did better with you at the eighty-eight..."

"All right, Billy. I'm with you," Tom said. "How's Hallie? How's the show?"

"They still come to hear Hallie. There's something missing, Tom. Hallie's changed."

"How?"

"Oh, hell! We all go upstairs once in a while. You know that. She's taken up craps. I tried to steer her off but Haggerty got red-eyed and said he'd stool to Fabian. I think Ed Fabian's behind it. The talk is that she owes Fabian a left lung. In advances."

Billy left to get back to the place for rehearsal. Their talk took place three days before Tom's debut in the Civic Opera Theater. The next few days passed in a sort of daze. He rehearsed wildly night and day. The afternoon of the concert Tom was a nervous wreck. He knew not alone his career but his and Hallie's future depended on his succeeding. He was alone in the hall he had rented at the music school where he did his practicing.

The music was before him. He had played it until he was letter perfect. Suddenly he was frightened. The thought he might fail had come to him. His fingers ran over the keys and as though through a will other than his they struck chords, notes they hadn't touched for weeks. Over The Mountain. He played it as he used to. There was a difference this time. No spine-tingling chills, no gripping of his innards, no fear. It was as if *they* were with him...

HE DIDN'T bother reading the revues. He knew! There had been no doubt for him. He had been a terrific success. Now it would only be a short while before he could give Hallie the money he had used so badly. And more important, tell her she had not made a mistake in her trust, even though it seemed she had. Later, there would come the time for asking her to marry him...

But first he had to tell her.

The band was on the stand which meant Hallie had just left for the

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hour and a half break between the second and third shows. Tom remembered the show breaks. He made it a point to skirt the tables close to the glassed-in bar. Billy was sure to see him. The trumpet player caught his eye. Tom jerked his thumb up and Billy nodded.

So she was upstairs.

She was at the crap table. Fabian was at her side. Tom stood behind them and watched her. She did not win even once. She turned at last to say something to Fabian and Tom was shocked at what he saw. She seemed the same until he saw her eyes. They were without expression, staring. Fabian kept shaking his head to what she was saying. Finally she shrugged her shoulders and turned to go. Fabian moved with her. They saw Tom at the same time.

She came to him with a smile of pleasure but Fabian was obviously not pleased at his being there.

"Hallie," Tom said, "I've good news."

"I know. Billy called the theater right after the concert. Oh, I'm so glad."

"Yeah," Fabian broke in. "She's glad, you're glad, everyone's glad but Ed Fabian. Let's go to the office."

"What for? I want to see Hallie alone. There are things we've got to talk over."

"That's why we're going to the office," Fabian said.

It was then Tom noticed the two men standing close to his side. He recognized them. Fabian's muscles. Tom took her arm and they marched to the office. The muscle men walked behind them a few paces.

Tom took a stand at her side. The muscle men stood to either side of the door. Fabian spread himself behind the desk, his feet on the desk top.

"What's the pitch, Fabian?" Tom asked.

"Pitch? No pitch. The chick owes me dough. Heavy scratch. Twelve grand in advances. I just want to know where I stand. A man's entitled to that I think?"

"You're not a man and you're not entitled to anything. I don't know who talked her into shooting craps but that game you run's rigged. I ought to know."

Fabian made a sucking sound through his false uppers. He seemed to think it funny. Abruptly the smile faded and Fabian's feet came off the desk top. "Okay! I don't like her work anymore. She's fired. I want my money. Now what?"

"So she owes it to you," Tom said. "I'll see to it that you're paid. I was given guarantees for fifty thousand dollars for advance concerts. I'll give you my note on what she owes you."

Fabian told him what he could do with the note.

And Tom took the step forward which separated them and pounded his fist into Fabian's face. Blood spurted from smashed flesh. Tom broke Fabian's nose with the one punch.

He heard Hallie scream from behind. Then lightning struck him. There was searing pain, and after a while the room stopped spinning. There was a sticky wetness on his face and his side hurt with every breath.

"Hold it, boys," a nasal voice was saying. "We got time for that. I want some fun first..."

Hallie's arms were about him, her voice sobbing in his ear. "Darling. They hurt you. Oh, please, darling. Don't let them hit you again."

He got to his feet, held her close and looked through his one good

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eye at the man behind the desk. Fabian was holding a blood-stained kerchief to his leaking nose. He spoke through the fine fabric:

"Not for twelve. Twenty-five grand. You took it before, you'll take it again. Twenty-five grand in advances. And bring it here. By noon tomorrow."

"But..."

"Shut up! The chick stays here until then. If you don't show..." there was the sound of gurgling laughter.

"Okay. I'll get it. But if you so much as harm a hair on her head..." he let the threat hang on the air.

"You'll do nothing!" Fabian said flatly. "And you ain't going nowhere just yet. That dough is for what she owes me. And interest. But for socking me and for playing me for a chump, that's another thing! No broad plays Ed Fabian like she did me. We're staying here until the show ends."

"I LIKE the way you play the piano, Gaynor," Fabian said. He was sitting at table directly below the stand. His strong arms stood to either side of his chair. "So you're going to play and the chick'll sing until I get tired of it. And I've got an idea it's going to be a long while. Go on!"

She sang and he played, until her voice was a whisper and his fingers numb. And still Fabian listened.

"We can't go on much longer," Tom warned.

"Can't? Help 'em, boys," Fabian replied.

One of them rapped Tom's fingers with a blackjack so hard the knuckles split. The other slapped Hallie with the back of his hand across the mouth. A tiny thread of blood slipped from her compressed lips. Tom leaped from his stool and started toward the one who struck the girl. The blackjack caught him alongside the skull and again everything faded in darkness.

"I love you, Tom," Hallie was saying. "From the first. I lost my trust but I've found it again."

He looked up at her. She was standing over him. The thread of crimson was still flowing. He got to his feet swayed dizzily and touched her mouth gently.

"Okay! Let's go. You've stalled enough. Or do you both want another treatment?"

He went back to the piano. He struck the opening chords and Hallie stiffened abruptly. Her fingers went to the silver cord about her throat and pulled it out. There was a miniature spinning wheel at the end of it. She held it close to her breast as Tom played and she sang. The song was Over The Mountain...

Tom couldn't keep his eyes from the spindle. The tiny skein of thread was moving, the entire wheel was moving. And Tom shouted:

"Now. Come from out of the mists! She needs you. Now!"

* * *

They came, wraith-like as if from the floor. They were grim, unsmiling, men and women alike. The *hill-people*. They moved in measured step, a dance Tom had never seen before. A huge circle. He crashed the chords out, forgetting the pain of broken knuckles. And her voice was clear and strong above the sound of the piano. Below the dance continued. Now they circled closer until they were moving around the three men below. Tom could not see Fabian and his strong men clearly. They seemed enveloped in a mist. The dancers were closer now, hiding them. And Tom ended the song in a wild crash of sound.

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And echoing the sound came a single wild scream.

They were gone, all of them. And with them the three they had danced about.

Tom ran to Hallie, lifted her from the floor where she had fallen in a faint at the end of the song. He called endearing words to her, patted her hands, stroked her face. She opened her eyes.

"What happened, Tom?"

"I don't know. All I know is that Fabian and the others are gone. Let's get out of here."

They were at the door when Tom heard the voice. He would have sworn it was Mr. Destiny's voice:

"...It was all arranged from the beginning. Fate, you know..."

THE END

DRUG-EATER RECEPTION

☆ By W. R. Chase ☆

THE ROCKET BASE, Base Three as it was called, jumped with activity the minute the news came in. Commander Phillips' office was a milling beehive even as the coded message was released.

"Freighter Z-234 coming in with a full load. Careful—crew may be hopped:.." That cryptic message was enough. Phillips knew that the Jovian operator had spotted a loading of the violent virulent drug—paradane. Now it was up to him to confiscate the load—and crew. Sometimes, if crew members knew a cargo of the stuff was being carried, they got into it. Then it was too bad.

Crisply Phillips snapped his commands. Base Three was not a military reception port and Phillips was more a customs inspector than anything else, but ten minutes after the message was received he had set his reception committee in order.

There was a half hour to go yet before the freighter was due to dock, but Phillips wandered down to check the area. It had been carefully blocked off.

"How is it?" Phillips asked Semmons, his lieutenant.

"First rate, sir," the other grinned behind the helmet of his heavy space suit, "we've got enough armament—all the portable stuff at least, to blow them all to hell, if they start anything."

Phillips quietly noted the portable flamers, heat rays of fierce intensity, their power cables snaking back to generators.

"You'd better climb into armor, if you're going to stay around," Semmons suggested as he noticed his chief peering at things he thought to himself.

"Can't pick them up, sir," a radioman reported, "Looks nasty."

"They're going to give us trouble," Semmons said. "Good thing we've got enough men. Did you order the surrounding area cleared, Sir? It's going to be hot in here shortly."

"Not a soul around," Phillips nodded. He looked odd behind his stellite suit.

The freighter appeared in the sky and within minutes it was warping into the dock on its underjets. With a heavy thud, slight for its massiveness it settled into its berth. For a moment nothing happened.

"All members will come out with their hands up, unarmed. This is a formal patrol inspection," Phillips said curtly over the 'phone. No answer.

"Take half a dozen suited men and a cutt—Look out!" Phillips voice broke as the outer door swung open. No one appeared in it. The dock was in silence. Behind their projectors and portable apparatus the patrolmen crouched, waiting for what they suspected.

Suddenly, as if ejected from a catapult a half dozen bodies appeared through the open airlock door. Heavily encumbered though they were by armor, they moved fast. Weapons were in their hands, and behind their helmets could be seen—if close—the drug-crazed eyes of total maniacal murderers. That was paradane.

Their weapons flared, but the patrolmen were prepared. Coruscant blasts of heat beams seared down the length of the dock. High speed armor piercing projectiles coughed from mounted blasters. And the emerging men, frenzied as they were, and armored against the devil himself, died in the withering searing holocaust.

There was no rhyme nor reason to their attack. But since when does a drug-eater know reason? They died hurriedly—it was better for them.

In seven minutes, the dock area was a reeking shambles. Drug-eaters have a tenacity of life that requires reduction with nothing less than obliteration, and more than one patrolman still bears scars of the encounter.

Finally it was finished. Phillips surveyed the scene of carnage and shook his head. "Poor devils," he mused, and then he spoke into the coder-phone: "Z-234 received," he said crisply, "crew destroyed..."

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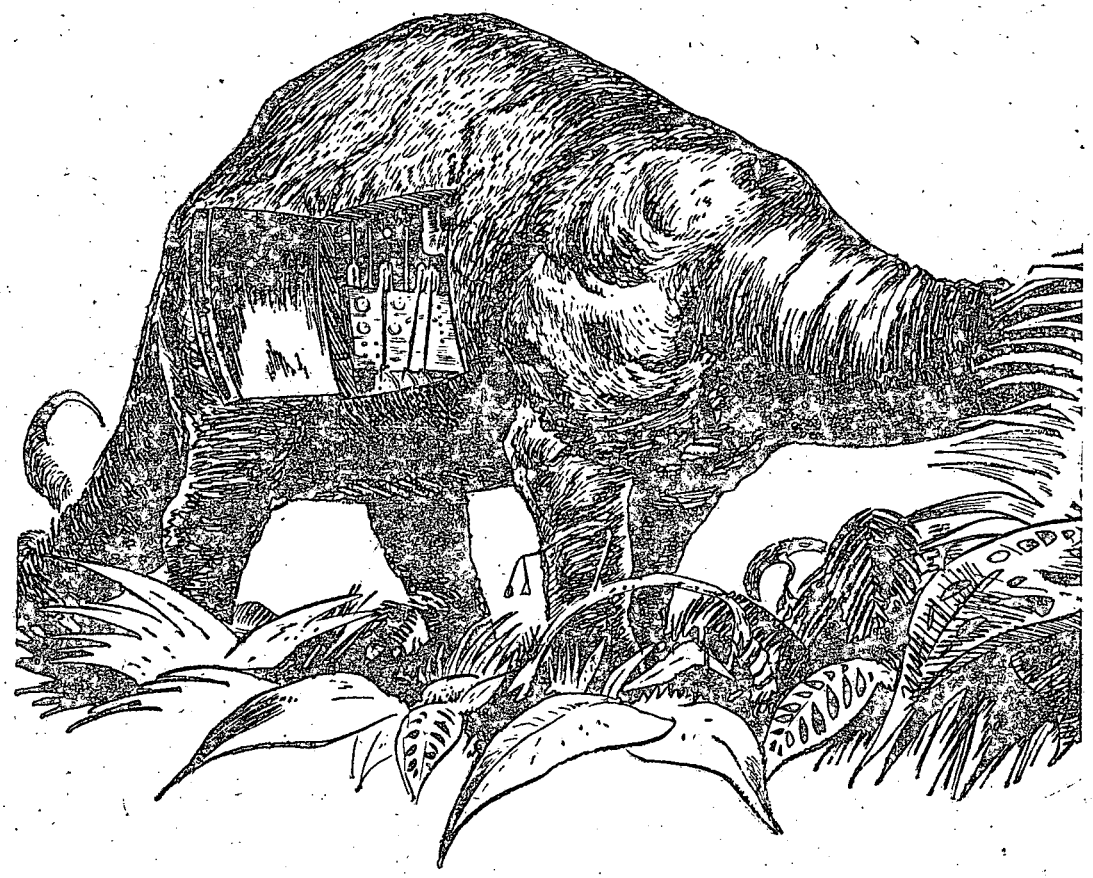
THE WORLD OF THE LOST

By PAUL LOHRMAN

A long time ago, on Earth, giant dinosaurs roamed, and if they remained, there would be no chance for man—so they had to be killed . .



Gur and Suima crouched in the undergrowth watching with wide eyes as the door swung open in the side of the supposed beast.

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"Apollo, my son, God of Tah, behold the red star, the earth, she cometh through thy dominions."

The Book Of Apollo

THE WOMAN, Enthippe, was wisdom, heavy-eyed with study, long enthroned in respect.

White she was, her skin soft and young, with shapely woman's arms, long, clever fingers, and a body in which beauty and leadership had been wed to one meaning.

Black as night her hair, and her face lovely and sad with knowing the sorrows of men. Her eyes were dark, deep-lined with the knowledge, and her dark head hung, thinking that man, the whole race born of woman, was doomed to witlessness—to misery, war and to the life of a driver ant.

For while her wisdom told her how men might be saved from their futility, it did not tell her how to make men know what she had for them, or how to give them the way to save themselves. For knowing and doing are two far different things. And it was this knowledge of how to do that she sought, wearily.

In her dark home in unknown and mysterious depths beneath the Earth's surface, she sorted over the ancient records of the early days of the plan-

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et—the days of men and Gods upon earth.

Sorrowfully she watched the misty vapors of the thought cloud swirl within the globular force fields. Within the fluorescing vapors the images and happenings of another time and place were real before her. Perhaps this one would tell her.

It was the record of the God Apollo, to whom the care of Mother Mi, the planet Earth, had been given when she swam into his domain.

She leaned forward, and she knew the thought of the God as he watched.

The vital energy she had absorbed from the ancient beneficial machines coruscated about her in a visible aura, moving too, forward with her body in a flashing interplay of a myriad colors.

Within the vapors was a red star, and bending over the scene was the great shadow of a being whom she knew was Apollo, watching from his mighty ship of space—the *Airavagna*.

Closer came the red star, and presently it became green and blue, white sands bordered the blue, a great continent was seen on the globe. Closer, and the father of all rivers flowed pale-yellow and sluggish down the whole face of the continent. She knew this vast sluggish sea of a river was what the Mississippi had been when it was a part of the Ep'hsu, the great waterway.

Now the view swept up the current, and in the North were two great seas, and their names she heard as Vid and Saijans, but she knew they were Superior and Michigan.

Closer to the eye came the yellow flood, and snorting and splashing in the water were great-toothed saurians, vast-bodied, long-necked; with tails to beat down a hundred men; and others plated like tanks with bony armor. Vast masses of waterweed lined the current, and dragonflies with the wingspread of a hawk hovered billiantly. The smell was of a swamp with no drain, choking with weed-life. Great white watersnakes writhed through the openings of the weed, the sturgeon poked its sharp nose after frogs, and the singing of insects was a symphony of multivaried sound in the ears.

Closer still to the view came the yellow flood, and the powerful shadow of the God leaned closer over the images—for upon the yellow flood, beyond the choking grasses and floating weeds, in the open water of the sluggish current—floated a long craft with a bright red sail. The shadow of Apollo was interested in the people of this planet given to his care.

The craft was a kind of barge, half raft and half ship, built of roughhewn logs. On it were sprawled several figures, and at the tiller dreamed a youth.

The hold was filled with rough bars of copper, hides of deer in bundles, skins of foxes and white winter pelts of the marten.

Telepathically, Enthippe entered the mind of the youth at the tiller of the ship. Enthippe smiled to see he was thinking of a girl, like other youths. She lost herself in the happenings of that life and of the mighty shadow that was a watching God—and Enthippe was no more herself, but a youth named Gur.

Gur was an Ongwee; long black hair, copper skin, strong, straight limbs, sharp black eyes as piercing as a hunter's sighting game.

The girl of whom he was thinking was an Ihin. He had no right even to think of her, for she was of the sacred people. The Gods forbid love or intercourse between the Ong-

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weeghan and the Ihin.

Gur looked at her back, where she walked on the deck near at hand, all those delicate curves undulating sensuously. Gur wondered what evil spirit possessed him that an Ihin maiden should be his desire. For was it not forbidden? Yet was it not also true that the Rabbahs said that the Ongweeghan sprang from the union of Ihins and Ihuans? How then could it be wrong of Ihins and Ongwee to love? Gur wondered if those people who prate of the greater God's commands always tell the truth.

The sun was sinking lower, and the night of Adu, of swift death from the hunting flying-beasts, was coming nearer. Gur called the girl to him while yet the sun was pleasant and the air balmy with odors rank, but to his nostrils sweet, telling of the mighty growth of the land along the Ephsuh—and of the meat that might be killed there by a sharp-eyed hunter.

"Come and talk to me, Suima. To sit alone..."

"You know forbidden it is!"

"Suima, it is even forbidden to kill the great lizards for food, yet the whole race of the Ongwee feed upon the flesh of the great lizards. If you listen to all the words of those God-addled praters, you will not even laugh! Come and sing to me a sinful song, and we will laugh a sinful laugh, and even steal a sinful kiss or two when no one is looking!"

Suima tossed her bright head and turned her far too graceful back upon Gur again.

But after a moment she thought better of it and came and leaned against the low plank stern railing of the ship beside him. She asked—"How is it that only the Ongwee work these ships that travel Ephsuh's waters?"

The tail of a plesiosaurus slapped the great boat like thunder as its sliding weight nudged his sleeping back, and for a time the boat rocked, the timbers creaked and groaned, and the waves of the driving swirl of power alongside as the beast dived away pounded heavily against the ship. Gur answered.

"Many are the dangers that beset travelers along this water-way beside the plains of Go'magat. But chiefly they are in danger from the raiding of the wilder tribes of the Ongwee. Mainly they raid to kill as many hairy Ihuans as possible, not because they want the copper or the timbers. That is why I and my kind are here in these boats. We are strong and swift in a fight, good men with the bow and quick with a copper blade; but the real reason is that we are Ongwee. The wilder Ongwee who have not made compact with the king of Avaya will not fight with us, for we are their brothers. They wait always along the river-sea for ships to come manned by the hairy, short-legged and ugly Ihuans, for they think they are ordered to kill them by their God. And I think their God is as wrong as your God who tells you to be silent to me."

"How is it that you speak like an Ihin, quick and sharp and open and wise, instead of wild and boasting as other Ongwee with their war-talk and their blood-thirst?"

"You know that the Ongwee are descended of the Ihins and the short-legged Ihuans, not so long ago. Is it odd that I should be like my great-grandfather?"

Gur looked at her eyes, reflecting the blue of the sky like the morning, and the sun gleaming on

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her hair like many lamps. It was very strange that a daughter of the sacred Ihins should be traveling so very far alone. Like a daughter of the sun she had come to the docks of the miners on the shores of Vid, and taken passage to Om, which is by some called Mexico.

"Why alone, little beauty? Have you no father and mother, no strong brothers? Must I be your brother against them who would take you by force?"

"I am Suima. I am not afraid. I came the long way north with my mother, across half the world it seemed, to join my father. He had been sent to help with the shorings of the mines, for he is a great builder. We found my father dead, killed by the foolish work of those who had worked there before him. My mother took poison from her ring, as was her right and duty. I return again to my own land where I know the way of life, and leave all this barbarous land to the savage meat-eaters."

In spite of her young show of courage there was sorrow and strain in her voice, and Gur clucked his tongue between his teeth like a mother hen. She changed the subject.

"Have you ever been to Om, and seen the glittering towers of Rakowana; seen Thes'onka, her polished copper roofs shining in the sun like gold; seen the dances of the Ihin maidens at mating time; seen the white-sailed boats flying over Lake Owane? Have you ever been to Om, Gur?"

"Once I stayed with a rich ship all the way to the towers of Rakowana. But I was ordered back with the next at once. The soft Ihuan rulers like not the sturdy Ongweeghans making a habit of traveling their cities. They fear us. It is a rich land, but it is not a good land, Suima. Give me the free air of the plains, the rich hunting of the swamps of the great snakes, in preference to all their cities of stone and their feathered parades of mimic might. Fancy are their blades of obsidian and lovely are their copper maids gilded and decorated.

Foolish and evil are they to throw such maids to the sacrifice. I like it not, Suima."

"We Ihins like not their customs, either. But they need us and our wisdom. They leave us our freedom for the use of our wits. And wise are the leaders of the Ihins to keep the secrets of masonry and of building and the ways of digging canals to themselves. Else they would treat us as they treat their own Ihuans—like dirt under their feet.

"Yet they use you Ihins, as they use the Ongwee, for all the things they cannot or dare not do themselves. Why is it, little Suima of the golden hair, that we who are in many ways wiser and more able than the Ihuans are yet their laborers?"

"Because they are stronger by three to one than all of us together. And so the God has decreed."

"I would like one day to meet this God, Suima. I would say many things to him he would not like."

"Perhaps I would do that, too, O Gur of the bold eyes."

How Gur should take that remark, and what were the inward workings of the nature of this lovely young Ihin, Gur might have learned before that long voyage down the Ephsu, past the plains of Gomaghat, and past the plains of Takshan and her great stone walled cities, and onto the long quiet canals of Om, where the great serpents and the leaping

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three-toed lizards are never seen...

Boiling suddenly now before the bow came the mighty lashing whirl of a battle between monsters under the yellow flood...

From that yellow boil of fury and driven water came a roaring as of the winds of heaven at war. From that tangle of a great snaky entwining neck topped by a vast triangular head that was all one trap-like mouth with teeth the size of an Ongwee war-shield, wrapping about the striving lashing body of a garkil. The garkil is half mouth like a great gate to his belly, and four strong limbs like young oaks, and after that a tail as long and as strong and vastly thicker than the mast of a ship.

Fighting free from the grip of the nixtli, the garkil saw escape upon the dry deck of the ship. Surging aboard half his length lay across the ship, and half over the side. The ship, big as she was, listed terribly; and the rail was awash with the yellow water pouring in on the cargo.

Suima screamed again and again, and her soft city-bred arms were around Gur's waist now so that he could do nothing, were there anything to do against such vast strength and clumsy power.

With a threshing as of a great waterfall, the long-necked nixtli came around and swept down again upon the crocodilic garkil, the vast prehistoric ancestor of the modern alligator. The creature flung the rest of its tremendous scaly weight upon the ship as he tried to get his body wholly out of the water and upon the ship. The nixtli, great head rearing on its long neck, began to climb aboard after its prey. His great triangular mouth dripped blood and fragments of the garkil's hide. The nixtli roared with the lust of battle, and added his weight to the vast weight of the garkil.

The red-sailed ship gave an ominous, increasing creaking and groaning of timbers strained beyond their strength. Half the deck came awash, the tall mast cut a slow, dignified arc against the brassy evening sky—and Suima and Gur were suddenly swimming in the surging waters filled with endlessly varied seeking death.

Behind them was a great boiling place where the ship had been, a floating mass of fragments and bales of skin. The weight of the copper cargo had taken the overturned ship straight to the bottom. There were other swimmers, calling for help—the guards, good men of the Ongwees and stout friends of his; but Gur's hands were full of Suima. The others would have to take care of themselves. The shore was a good half-hour swim away through water that teemed with savage and voracious life. They swam but slowly, Suima beside Gur making little, ineffectual paddling movements, Gur swimming hard, pulling her along.

Fear swam beside the pair making deep surging ripples underneath them, snorting fearful nostrils now and again near at hand, or touching their bare legs with great rough skin that tore and left bloody marks and pain. But on they swam, and ever nearer came the green waving grasses of the swampland that was shore to this sea of primal life. Green slime covered their lifting arms, weighting them down, Suima was gasping, her face near smothered out of sight with the algae. Gur was puffing like a sea-lion, but his strokes still strong, they made progress.

At last they touched their feet

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into the thick mud and tried it—and sank beneath the water with its softness, struggling terribly against drowning ere they freed themselves and swam again a long way in and their knees struck the mud again.

Now paddling like two lizards they drew themselves flat across the green muck and up, up, onto firmer ground. All muddied from head to foot and covered over with the green slime, they looked like two green moss-covered apparitions risen from the muck.

Fear of another kind came now to them, the fear of the life that hunts the shoreline; of the giant Diatryma that hunts always, running with its great legs faster than any deer; fear of the swooping pterodactyl, that comes out with the setting sun to hunt for the great fish washed ashore and stinking ripe for such things as its own horrible self to enjoy; fear of the "big snakes", things like the Nixtli, but which hunt the land, running with great strides on two legs, their little forelegs with hands like men for grasping, and heads that split open to make a great flexible maw like a python's, to swallow anything of any size they can overtake.

There were of these dinosaurs known to Gur some hundred different kinds, from small ones like rats to great ones sixty and more feet in length, armored or slick skinned, scaled and toothed, a nightmare of gigantic fast-running death, waiting for them on the shore. And him with but one wet-stringed bow, and some thirty arrows to protect them. All these fears' awful actualities he knew were waiting for them in that trackless low-hilled waste of the distance, hidden in the man-high grasses, lying in the labyrinths of prickly thickets, nesting among the great fernlike trees.

Gur was struck with a great fear, not so much for himself, but for the helpless, small, soft, appealing Suima beside him covered with slime which she set about scraping off, her golden hair wet and filthy with mud about her shoulders, her soft city-bred form leaning against his own with weariness from the long swim. Gur looked down at her, his face grimacing with a foretaste of the agony of death at the hands of the predators that he knew would surely be theirs.

With the sinking of that ship, Gur had known. They could not survive the wilderness; not only two! Whole hunting parties of strong men sometimes came not back at all, after starting some herd of giant dinosaurs from their beds in the thickets.

Over him Gur felt a strange stirring as of a god shape invisible but all-powerful, a weird shadow running through his mind as much as across the landscape, and a gigantic whispering voice made a meaning in his mind.

"Fear not. The reptiles are my study and my work, now. Your earth has come into Apollo's realm."

And what that might all mean Gur did not know or dare to think, but he fell down on his face and gave his mind up to awe. "If it is true there are gods such as I now hear talking our life depends now on your good heart."

For an answer Gur heard a faint humming all through his body, and a great tide, a charge of vital energy grew swiftly within his fibres, and strength to lift a mountain seemed now suddenly come to live within him. He got up, grinning an awed grin, for he had always thought the tales of the gods but old men's prattling over the food-fires, and not a man's truth at all. Knowing

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was about suddenly, Gur had to grin what all that talking of the gods at what a fool he had been all his life. No more would he laugh and go fishing when the procession wound to the mound temple. He would be in the front, chanting. For the gods had suddenly given him strength, and that was good.

CHAPTER II

"The Lord said: Thy God findeth the earth filled with beasts of prey and great serpents, which must be destroyed. The time hath come for the labor, O Apollo."
The Book Of Apollo

GUR BUILT a fire there on the shore, and dried his bowstring. They cleaned themselves and dried their clothes. Night was upon them before they finished, and Gur made ready to defend himself during the night.

Gur had a thin copper blade about a foot long in a scabbard. His heavy dino hide shield, covered with bosses of copper for strength, and his other gear, had gone down with the barge. His bow and the thin light blade were his only equipment against the fearful carnivorous life of this primal jungle.

Suima was clad in a short tunic of cotton, block-printed with the sacred symbols, and with the protective double-headed serpent in a border at the hem. A belt of square beaten copper plates on each of which the little figure of a sacred animal was engraved, and a necklace of gold beads were her sole possessions now. The gold beads were little carved faces of men, some with the duck bill of a priest's mask, others with the fierce eyes and huge ears of a god.

Gur's clothing was a skirted clout of dinosaur hide, a belt and sword scabbard of the same universally used material, and a quiver over his bronze shoulder. His bow, about four feet in length, he carried hooked by a thong about his neck, hanging down his back. The thong was slip-knotted, came loose at a tug. Of ornaments, he had a gold band about one bicep, and about each leg just below the knee hung two tassels, the scalp-locks of enemies.

His bow was fashioned of hickory wood. He had made it himself, carefully, with much consultation with the older members of his tribe. There were three tribes of Ongwees about Lake Vid, the Sastaks, the Normaks, and the Haldaks. Gur was a son of the Normaks.

The Normaks were famous hunters, living chiefly on the flesh of the bigger predators, the dinosaurs whom lesser men feared to hunt. But the Normaks had developed a system of hunting, and trapped and slew regularly more than enough of the great beasts. Chiefly they used a baited log-fall on the smaller beasts, and they kept always many great pits baited and ready for the larger of the carnivores, for they hated them with a personal hatred, remembering the comrades and relatives slain by them. So along the great tracks of the feeding dinosaurs, along the trails they used at the water edge, they dug always the great pits—and always the stupid giant snakes walked into them. And always where the Normaks hunted rose into the air the stench of putrefying carcasses, too huge to be all useful.

Gur thought of the great trees of his homeland, in the north, where they waited and hid on the hunting platforms while the great beasts were aboard. He prayed for just one such tree to rise out of the great grassy plain, but it did not. Only the moon rose above the horizon, softly lessening the fast gathering dark with its placid light.

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Gur gathered more of the green brittle branches from the thickets, and fed the smoky fire. Suima sat, quiet and lovely and confident. Gur wished he was as confident as she looked. He knew that just one of the great beasts scenting them would mean their end. But the night passed slowly, quietly, and the moon drifted on across the black god-paths above, and went to rest. The black closed down, and in the distance laughed the hyaenadons, the dongas. Overhead the great batlike forms of the pterodactyls, the garbats, wheeled and gave their weird scream like a wounded beast in agony; wheeled and swooped toward the fire and away again from fear. Through the thickets crashed great forms that made the soft ground tremble, but none came near the fire-glow. And Gur gave thanks to the god, Apollo, who had spoken to him, a god he had not known before.

The sun came up at last, brazen and full of heat. The sweat started on Gur's body early. They traveled north, back to his people—where else should they go? Suima knew there was nowhere else for them. Hundreds of miles they must travel, up along the shore of the Ephsu, and along Vid to the north to reach his people. Then their dugouts would take Suima again to the docks of the copper mines, and himself again to work on the ships that travel the Ephsu's slow current.

But Gur did not expect to reach home again; for no other ever had managed to travel such a distance alone. Only in the trees of his homeland forests could a man travel far and live. And then only if he stayed in the trees.

But there were terrors in those stretches of swamp and grassy bottoms and low forested hills that even Gur had not ever imagined.

They toiled on through the saw-edged grass, Suima ahead where Gur could keep an eye on her. Sweat poured, the swamp stunk in the sun, the little black flies and the big dino-flies bit, hummed and darted. Overhead wheeled a single condor, a lone dot gloriously high, and closer in great slow arcs swung a half-dozen buzzards. Gur felt they had seen the pair of mad humans, were waiting to pick their bones when their sure death came to them.

But Gur was following a half sensed, half visible trail. He knew it was a human foot path, and where such marks lay, there was nearby some kind of village. As the trail grew plainer, his worries lessened, for if it had grown less plain, it would mean the village lay behind.

They toiled up a low hill, painfully crawled to the brink, parted the thick growths to look down beyond. On their bellies, flat and motionless, they took in the scene below.

Nestling between two hills on the far side of a grassy valley lay a young city of hewn stone. The roofs of polished copper, the armored guards pacing the walls, the great copper sheathed tower of the temple topping the pyramid marked it to Gur as a city of the Ihuans, one of those settlements built by the southern rulers of the Ihuans to push their empire northward.

Through the gaping gates hunkered throngs of the shortlegged, hairy Ihuans, women carrying great bundles of fuel, baskets of meat cut from some hunter's kill, green stuff from the gardens surrounding the city walls. Soldiers strutted, their bandy legs sheathed in metal-studded wrappings, round targets on their back, swords glittering in

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sheaths at their sides. Hunters, mostly Ongwee, and only one to ten of the other, were scattered through the throng, their taller, more graceful forms proud, their war-plumes nodding, their scalp trophies tasseled at waist and knee. Gur's heart stirred strongly to see thus the proud difference of race that made the Ongwee hunters stand out like men above monkeys to the hairy, ugly, big-mouthed, heavy-bellied Ihuans.

To Suima the sight was a release from fear, the fear she had hidden so well from the watchful eyes of Gur. The Ihins—a proud and quiet race, who lived by their wits among the denser, more primal Ihuans—were too proud to show fear before an Ongwee. For the Ongwee were savage barbarians, while the Ihins considered themselves civilized by comparison.

Even as they looked, a strange confusion, a furore swept through the throng of people. A trumpet blared from the walls. Soldiers could be seen running, s i n g l y...then squads of them pouring out of the barracks beyond the walls. The people still outside the walls began to run madly toward the gates. Only the Ongwee hunters showed no haste. They s t o o d, proudly fearlessly, shading their eyes with their hands as they peered toward the north for the cause of the sudden fright.

Gur raised himself from his cover, peered to the north too.

Thundering down the long, shallow valley was a vast herd—a dinosaur herd—in stampede. Gur had never seen so many of the great lizards. It was a very strange thing, for the dinos do not ordinarily congregate in such numbers. A dozen shes feed about some great bull, yes, for the protection. But hundreds of them in one mass—it was unheard-of to him.

Moreover they were not of one kind. Leaping far ahead of the rest came the tyranosaurs, speedy on their great jumping legs, called by Gur and his people "adunes", meaning "friend of death". Behind them came the thunder-lizards, vastly larger than the adunes, but not so fierce, a grass-feeder with long neck and vast elephantine legs. Still behind them lumbered the brontosaurs, armored tanks on legs; triceratops, their triple horns jabbing right and left to keep off the press. For each of these Gur had a name of his own, an Ongwee word.

Down upon the walls of the town thundered this mass of mad flesh and fury. Gur and Suima lay still and silent, frozen with worry and an inability to understand the significance of what they were witnessing.

The walls—a stockade of logs filled with rocks and rubble and earth between the double wall of log uprights—held at first, broke the first mass of the rush. But a great brontosaur blundered against the shut gate, the thing gave, crashed down, and the town lay open to the maddened beasts.

Gur knew that this was a new town, a temporary structure, a place for workmen to live while the stones were cut for the strong permanent homes, for a strong and massive stone wall to be built all around—as was the custom of the civilized of the Ihuans. Only the tall temple had been finished, and inside the wall Gur could see the people fleeing their flimsy structures to take shelter in the stone temple tower topping the pyramid.

Now, as Gur watched this scene, a mad thing happened, a thing that he could not accept any more than

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we can accept the fourth dimension.

A great, peculiarly colored and textured reptile lumbered nearer and nearer their hiding place in the grasses. Slowing at last before them, the great thing stopped its ludicrous gait, came to a halt, its head sagging to the ground in weariness.

And Gur's eyes popped out of his head as a door slid open in the side of the monster, and a man like himself came out of the bowels of the big snake.

He lay down beneath the now strangely motionless monster, put to his eyes a queer tube and lay watching the town below a long time. The screams of the dying, the crash and dust and commotion of the monsters tearing the town into small fragments, trampling the fleeing people, came to Gur through a haze of wonder. What magic was this, for a man to come out of a monster, for a man to live in a monster?

Gur could not move away, for the monster and the man were close, just under the brow of the hill. But Gur could do another thing. Softly he slid his bow forward, nocked an arrow. Carefully he picked the place in the man's neck—and as the bow thummed deep and true and all his senses told him the arrow sped true, he whipped another arrow from the quiver and set it in the man's back just under the blade. The man half rose, gurgled blood from his throat, turned slightly, horribly, to see what had struck him, and fell dead.

Gur leaped forward, his slim copper blade gleamed, and the man's queer thatch was lifted neatly from his bare gleaming skull, was tucked into Gur's belt.

Gur motioned to Suima, stunned at Gur's intrepidity, and at his bloody ways, her eyes wide with disgust and yet also with curious awe at Gur who was afraid of no wonder, came forward to him where he leaned peering into the dark interior of the strange beast that housed a man.

Gur had never seen anything like it. The inside was fitted with leather benches, with strange metal levers and glittering magic of which Gur had no knowledge. Fearfully, carefully, but yet irresistibly drawn, he crawled into the interior, sat on the bench, peered out of the two holes that were the animal's eyes. He saw the plain for a long way down the slow fall of the hill and nothing else. Suima came in, her mouth round with wonder, and peered too over his shoulder. And now Gur wonderingly laid hand on the glittering levers, pulled one, and let out a whoop as the great thing began to sway about him. The ground rocked, moved, and he was riding away inside the beast.

Suima screamed and grabbed Gur around the shoulders. Gur nearly fell over, grabbed hold of a lever to steady himself. In the two round windowing eyes, the whole world whirled in a circle, the room turned, tipped, began again its steady alternate swaying. The monster had turned around!

Through Gur was running now that strange strength-giving hum. He knew that the god-shadow was again in him, was conscious of him—and he knew too that something about this synthetic, metallic dinosaur had vastly interested the peering god-mind from afar.

Gur prayed softly to the god, under his breath. "Whatever God you may be, save me from this nightmare. I cannot understand. I am lost."

On plodded the great mechanical animal, and Gur and Suima sat, froz-

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en with awe of the unknown, within.

CHAPTER III

"This, then was the size of the Adavaysit; two thousand miles east and west. And the ship within it was one hundred miles, east and west."

The Book Of Apollo

FAR OVERHEAD floated the great ship of Apollo, and at the controls, peering into the great vision screen, sat the giant figure of the god, a son of Earth of long, long ago, peering down at the strange thing he had witnessed.

Behind him stood Cimiad, goddess of Noad and Rak, a small woman, dark-eyed, black-haired, with soft, deep emotions evident in the aura of force about her. Under her were some million female warriors. Beside her, also leaning over and watching the scene on the screens, was Phaeja, god of the Nors, and of Um, and a master of legions in his own right.

"Just what does this mean, this mechanical thing upon Earth? I had thought that none of the races now on Earth had recovered from the great destruction, that all were still primitive and without mechanical arts."

"It means that some race unknown to us has either come to Earth from space for conquest, or that some of the more advanced of these primitives have found the ancient sealed chambers under ground. Which it is I do not know—it may be both—but we shall soon know. And they had better mean well by these Earth peoples, for the Master has given the Earth into my keeping. That exhibition of cruel savagery in wiping out that settlement does not speak well for them."

Apollo turned his great head, curled with bronze wiry hair, his broad Jovian brow lighting as he looked on Cimiad—for he loved her well and she knew it. And on the brow of Phaeja, his friend, a cloud gathered to see the light in Apollo's eyes, for he too loved Cimiad—and Phaeja was not noted for meekness or hesitation.

Apollo noted the cloud on the face of Phaeja, and the rift that had come between them widened—for he understood, and it was not good that Phaeja should think that ill could come from such a source.

The great ship drifted lightly, following the slow lumbering mechanical monstrosity north, and ever the swift vision rays searched under Apollo's knowing fingers for the source of that monster.

INSIDE THE lumbering fake Dino, Gur was wearying of the motion. His stomach refused the unnatural feel of the swaying thing and he was dizzy. The air was close and with strange, oily smells and it was hot.

Now near at hand he saw through the two windows other similar lumbering beasts, all going northward in the same oddly regular and unhurried, yet too steady a gait for any wayward reptile, and Gur's sharp eyes knew at once they were also beasts like his own—not real, but machines made to look like beasts.

Northward and northward along the edge of the swamps that bordered the wide, river-sea. Then the weird procession turned away from the water toward a low mountain range to the west.

Gur did not wish to go with the mechanical dinos, did not know how properly to turn the thing, let it run on straight northward, crushing down the growths ahead, lumbering on.

Crashing after him swiftly, gro-

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tesquely hurrying came a larger mech-dino. Gur fiddled with the strange levers, trying to increase his speed. Instead the thing stopped!

Gur looked at Suima aghast. He pictured her given over to the warriors of these strange people who built these imitation monsters; his heart became lead. His long face told Suima what he was thinking.

"Never mind, Gur, we would have died anyway. Maybe it will not be so bad as you think."

The pursuing beast came alongside, stopped, the door in the side swung open—the enemy got out. Gur could not see them, the two eye windows pointed only straight ahead. He heard them pounding on the door, shouting in a strange tongue. Like all the tongues of that day, it was very similar to his own—he knew what they wanted.

Gur pulled out his copper blade, handed it to Suima. "Stand behind me, golden hair. If they try to take me—stab swift and sure."

He fitted arrow to bow, kicked the release catch—stood staring at the strangers over a broad-head war-arrow.

They leaped back in surprise. Suima gasped. Gur grunted.

They were not Ongwee, not Ihuan hairy men, not the sacred, golden-haired Ihins!

They were white-skinned, black-haired, big-eyed and most unmuscular. They were no people of whom he knew. That was why he was surprised.

Three short men they were, standing there, backgrounded by the open door in the side of their monster. Clad in woven fabrics instead of skins, without knives, swords or bows, they yet carried weapons in their metal-mesh belts of which Gur could make nothing.

About their heads a fillet of silver, and on the front of it a round medallion, and on the medallion the sacred T symbol crossed by two lightning bolts.

"Who and what are you?" Gur's voice showed his youth—it shook a little. These people were vastly mysterious.

For answer one man took from his belt a little round object, touched it with his finger—and the limbs of Gur froze suddenly, painfully. He could not move.

The men entered, laid Gur and Suima to one side roughly. One sat at the seat where the levers were, one sat looking down on Suima and Gur, one went back to the first beast.

The two mech-dinos lumbered off on the trail of procession. Gur could not see much, could not move.

MUCH LATER the motion ceased, the man sitting beside them took Gur's bow and the blade from Suima's hand, pointed at them a round something—and they were free, could move again. Painfully Gur stretched his stiff muscles—and leaped suddenly upon his captor. Gur had never been a captive—did not like the idea.

The little man went down with an e a s e astounding to Gur. Gur wrapped his hands around the slender throat, the man's tongue popped out—his eyes bulged, his face darkened ruddily—and the strange frozen force came again to Gur's muscles. He could not move. The man from the front seat at the levers had pointed the round thing at him again.

He jumped back, pried Gur's fingers from the throat of the other.

They trussed Gur up securely now with twisted grass rope, left only his ankles free for slow walking.

The two men pushed Gur and

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Suima ahead of them out into dim, cool air—a great cavern of rock was about them. Gur looked about wonderingly.

To Gur the vast, glistening, polished dome above, rock which the polishing, marvelously mirror-like, repeating endlessly and rotundly, distorting everything the Elder ones had placed there. It was another world, that polished rock about them, breathing stone instead of air—inlaid with lovely colors, deviate stars of pink and grey, subtle shadings, moving evanescent life within the granite. The marvelous forms of the Elder machines, incomprehensible to Gur, were lovely as woman is lovely and for the same obscure reason the mind—it is so, that is all.

The people who moved through the mirroring halls and vast wonder of magic mechanisms and endless beauty weirdly repeating in the rock reflection—those people were also strange to Gur.

Small and pale and dark-haired, there yet was about them a vast confidence in their power, and Gur had an awe of them, seeing the things they were doing.

That was magic higher than any Ihin prophecy or mumbo jumbo he had ever heard of. For into great hoppers they were dumping cars of earth—and from the other end of the mech to which the hopper was attached came mysterious metal pieces, shaped and ready. These workmen took and placed together in order, and from their work was emerging a row of fearful mechanical beasts, such as Gur had just ridden.

Neither Gur nor the strange people knew that the mechanisms were a factory of the Elder race of long ago—that the weird beasts whose parts they assembled had been but a kind of toy—made for the giant children of the gigantic Elder race. Neither Gur nor they knew that the giant children had ridden *on* the beasts and not *in* them—that their use of the weird, life-like animals to fool and devastate the Ihuan people, to drive them from the land, was not at all the purpose for which they were designed.

Gur did not know this race was nearly as ignorant as himself of mechanics—had only learned the secret of operating the unrusting machinery they had discovered in the sealed caverns a century ago. Gur could not have understood that a man can run a machine without being able to build or repair it—even though he had operated one himself, it had been inadvertently.

They were led before the chief of this people—an old man, grey haired. His little black eyes roved over Suima's young grace lewdly, and he licked his thick, ugly lips, glanced at his chief officer beside him suggestively. Suima raised her head proudly. Within himself Gur felt the humming strength that told him the far off wonder of the strange God presence was watching—was giving him strength magically for some undisclosed purpose.

The chief sat on a rude wooden throne, upraised on two wooden steps so that he could watch the activities of the great factory cave about him.

One of the men standing in a group about the throne, at a nod from the chief, stepped forward and with a single motion grasped Suima's tunic at the neck and ripped it from her body. She stood, naked, before the throng of people. Lovely, her face startled and suddenly embarrassed—she looked appealingly at Gur as if to ask: "Can't you do

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something about such indignity?"

The humming strength within Gur rose in pitch till it was audible all about him. It gave him a terrible confidence to know the invisible God was also angered—and the Godlike anger of the far-off being took possession of Gur as though his own anger were suddenly grown gigantically into a terrific strength.

With one convulsive effort Gur burst the ropes about his arms, about his legs, struck the guard beside him in the face with his fist. As the man fell, forward, like a death-stricken warrior falls, Gur caught the body, ripped the sword from the scabbard and leaped at the other guard. The sword passed through the neck, chopping hard on the spinal bones. Gur pulled it loose, twisting with incredible speed to avoid a charging warrior. Gur did not know the rays racing, humming through his body gave him synthetic animal energy in floods, made him a superman. He only knew that magically he was several Gurs rolled into one.

LEAPING like a flame through the muddled group tugging at the swords still useless in their belts, tugging at the strange cylinders of which Gur knew already the nature—Gur was invincible. Man after man fell before the sword that had become a sorcerer's wand in his hand, striking with blurring speed and irresistible force through any parry, through any metal or leather shield, through bones and flesh equally well. His progress toward the throne which he had made his goal was only stopped when the hardened copper gave under his savage use—turned into a useless piece of bent metal in his hand. Gur struck the next man beside him with his hand, flat on the back of the neck, and he fell to his knees. Gur seized the metal cylinder dangling at his belt. All the time Gur had wondered at the strange slow movement of these people, who seemed frozen by some hidden fear of force. Gur had much to learn of the ways of the Gods.

Gur pressed the stud on the gleaming cylinder, swept the thing in a circle upon the struggling mass of warriors pushing to place their bodies between the chief and this madman. Instantly they froze into complete immobility. The paralysis ray worked as well on themselves as on their enemies, Gur noted, for his superstitious mind had wondered if such magic were not selective, usable by themselves only.

This sudden turn left only himself and the naked embarrassed, yet proud Suima active among all these grouped about the throne. Quickly she freed her hands, which had been held by a single thong in the hand of the guard, put her torn clothing back in place as best she might, tied it with strips of its own fabric.

Meanwhile, Gur, suddenly weary, pushed the frozen, staring body of the chief from the rude throne. It toppled, thumping to the floor down the two tall steps—and Gur sat down in the throne, puffing, and eyed Suima.

"How do you like that?" asked Gur.

"You are the strongest, fastest man with a sword I ever saw. No Ihin has the right to feel superior to such an Ongwee! Gur, you were so angry when they did that to me—and look what you have done to them." Suima giggled loudly. "They lie about as though lightning had struck them!"

Suima's laughter was infectious. Gur began to laugh too. And it was

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thus that the curious people found them, as they came from their many tasks in the far caverns, attracted by the tumult, or came from their tasks near at hand assembling the parts of the metal monsters manufactured by the magic of the Elder mech from iron ore—came and stood in awe before this hero who had calmly laid the whole court low and sat himself laughing, upon the throne.

The strange humming came again to Gur's body, the weariness left. And with the new strength came an idea—perhaps his own, perhaps from the far God. Gur stood up, held up one red-stained hand.

"My people, as your new ruler, I decree today a holiday in celebration of the accession of Gur, the mighty, to your throne. You are a lucky people. No more will you have to work for these foolish ends. Gur has mighty plans—but they do not include such unnecessary labor. Go now, and celebrate properly."

As astounded as even Gur was himself at this development—the people trickled from the hall as they had entered, bemused with what had happened, home to their huts within the darkness of the hidden caves. Gur had acquired a mighty kingdom, though he did not fully realize it yet.

Suima, weary, gracefully stretched herself on the throne dais, her head on Gur's knees. Looking up at him, brooding over the sudden things that kept happening to him lately, her blue eyes shone with gratitude. It had been all too evident what her fate would have been otherwise.

FAR OVERHEAD, in the *Airavagna,* Apollo looked at Phaeja and Cimiad, chuckling, his face wreathed with humor.

"That savage is a whirlwind when you give him the energy, isn't he? I didn't expect him to do nearly so well. That little outfit of misusers of the ancient wisdom got theirs in a hurry. I think I will stick with this Gur and his charming Suima. They should make fine tools for the cleaning of this earth."

Phaeja, the cloud banished from his brow with interest in what they were planning, answered.

"They can be used to great purpose. But we will need many, many thousand such as Gur."

"Gur will get them, of his own will—but we will help him think a little. Methinks we have set a man on the path to greatness who would fight his way along to success without our help."

Cimiad spoke. "Gur is a healthy seed of the old race. Good lad, indeed."

Apollo mused. "It *was* a good race; it is too bad this sun is what it is. But we will try." From his words one would have thought he remembered the very beginnings of the race from which Gur sprang.

The great ship hung in the ether, waiting, and busily the mighty ones employed themselves with plans for the future of men.

GUR PONDERED for a long time, and Suima closed her eyes sleepily. She started awake as Gur spoke, sudden decision ringing in his voice.

"Write for me a message, Suima. To my people. I need men I can trust— I cannot continue with such tools never knowing who is loyal and who plots against me. Tell them to come to me..."

Obediently she found writing materials, stretched a soft skin tight with stones upon the planks of the dais—drew with a brush the primitive pictures.

"My brothers of the brave Normak,

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sons of the Eagle of Heaven, come to me, Gur, of the straight-talk. I have found a great treasure of value—the tribe will be rich forever. Come and help me. Across the terrible plains—come with my messengers. Ride always an armed warrior, ready to kill, as I do not know if these men be loyal to me or not. Come, my brothers—fear not the trail, for glory may be won beyond the tales of the old men, beyond the glory of the sun. Come to me."

Gur made his mark, a bird upon the back of a deer, and Suima set the message to dry. Gur held up a hand to one of the men who was standing, watching curiously, no doubt set by the others to tell them what he could of this new power amongst them.

The man came, timidly, bowing his head with awe before the warrior who had struck down the whole mass of the bravest men among them. Gur spoke, his own tongue sufficing, for the words were not dissimilar—only differently accented.

"You are one who drives these false beasts; I saw you get out when we arrived. I want you to get ten others who drive these things, and make a long journey for me, to the shores of mighty Vid in the north land. Are you afraid?"

"If you command we will go, O Hero. But what are we to do when we arrive?"

"You will bring the others of my people back here with you. You will talk to no others on the way. I will mingle the two peoples, these of this cavern, and those that are like me. They will be strong together, we will fear no one. Now go, and when you are ready—I will give you my message to my brothers."

THAT WELL known sword hanging by a hair became Gur's chief worry. These people were armed, they did not love him. It was just a question of time till they decided to rid themselves of him.

Gur took measures. The throne was moved to a smaller chamber. Nobody entered till unarmed and passed by Suima. A dozen guards selected by himself stood outside the doors of the chamber where Suima interviewed those who would a word with the new ruler.

But there was the hunting, the breath of life to Gur—he could not leave it alone.

Stalking the giant saurians with the false beasts was simplicity itself. Killing them with the ray tubes was simple too. It was all too simple, and it showed Gur how easily himself might be done away with if he did not reorganize his life to that end.

These people were fat and sleek, always well supplied with dino meat. Too well fed to be healthy, to Gur's thinking. And too idle, now that he had curtailed the labor, to keep out of mischief. They were grateful to him for relieving them of the other ruler, some had confided—but Gur worried.

To amuse himself and pass the time, Gur had those older, wiser members of this strange tribe teach him what they knew of the magic of the machines.

During the process of learning how the great vision rays were used to watch the surface life, for locating herds of dinos, and for watching the distance; the old man was showing Gur how the distance focus worked when into the center of the screen lumbered a long procession of false mech-dinos. Gur, startled, looked at the old man.

"Who is that?

"They are another of our tribes

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from another cavern. They are coming this way. It may be that they have a meeting scheduled with us which the former ruler failed to mention."

Gur and the old man, accompanied by his guards, men he had selected by careful inquiries for individuals who had failed to get along well with the former ruler, hastened to the chamber where Gur had locked up the former ruler and some dozen of the men who had lived through his attack. The paralysis ray with which he had felled them was not fatal.

"What does the procession of mech-dinos coming toward us mean?" asked Gur of the former ruler, sitting disconsolate on his haunches, surrounded by his "court", several of whom were chewing hungrily on bones—which was about all the tribe gave them to eat.

The ugly ruler laughed sneeringly. "It means your new fortune is at an end. They come to make war. Unknown to you I have sent a message to my cousin and friend, the ruler of the Batongwee tribe of Treasure-seekers. They have everything we have in these caverns and are quite as formidable, and are coming to put me back on my throne. Pleased?" The little ugly man leered triumphantly at Gur.

"Thanks," flung Gur over his shoulder, racing back to the screen where he had seen the long column deploying across the plain outside.

Gur, under the eyes of the old teacher, flung the ray across the wide plains, seeking the rest of the enemy. Far down the long shallow valley, where the ruins of the fortified town of the Ihuans lay stinking under the noon sun, he found another sight that gave him pause. Out of a score of ships drawn up to the shore were unloading a small army of troops, building material and ordinary people from the Ihuan southern Empire. Whether they were sent to rebuild the town, or whether the Empire in the south did not even know the town had been destroyed, Gur did not know. These could be just reinforcements and material sent to the destroyed town before it had been destroyed. It could also be a vengeful expedition of retaliation, the first forces landing to make ready for the greater might to come. Gur looked at the old adviser, who said,

"The Ihuans bring more death upon themselves. They can not understand that someone does not want them here."

"What will that bunch mean to these other cave people? Will they attack them, or come on to smoke us out?"

THE EXPEDITION forces from the south marched up the long grade from the landing, came at last in full view of the town they expected to find. They stopped, evidently aghast at seeing nothing but ruin and death. A wailing and a vast chatter of speculation as to what had happened to the town arose among them.

Over the ridge from the south came the long columns of the false dino beasts, on their way to annihilate the usurping ruler, Gur, and place the rightful king back on his throne. The foremost lumbering mech-beast paused, stood looking at the new batch of soldiers and colonizers from the southlands. The columns drew up behind him, all the big false eyes turned down on the strange people. Over the brow of the hill poured more and more of the tank-like metallic beasts. Gur watched with vast interest, hoping the newcomers had something in the way of a weapon against the strange cavern people. It would save him a lot of trouble if the

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Ihuans spent their blood fighting his new enemies.

Gur did not expect his people from the north-land for another week, did not want any strain placed on his slowly strengthening reins of government till he was more sure of himself. No one was more astounded than himself when another ray-watch turned to him from a nearby vision ray, saying:

"Our brothers return from the north, O Hero-king."

Gur swung the vision ray along the other's pointing ray—and on his screen sprang a sight beautiful to his eyes. Strung out behind the ten lumbering false beasts he had sent to the northland came his people, scattered well to avoid annihilation by any sudden charging dino, quivers well filled with broad-headed copper-pointed arrows, bows carried at the ready, women and children in the center of the column, warriors well spread on each side to give plenty of warning when trouble arose. Gur was proud of his people's military, confident appearance, the tall copper bodies, the fierce, painted faces, the nodding plumes, the bunches of scalp locks at the older warriors' belts—the whole fierce, warlike appearance of his own people.

Gur looked at the old man, standing beside him, his old eyes filled with a look Gur knew, the look a warrior has before a battle. The smell of blood gets in a man's nose, his pulses pound—this old one was sniffing war and longing for action, long denied him.

"Look, old one, you are a friend to me?"

"As good as any. I have seen you fight. I admire courage."

"Take one dino-mech. Go north to that column of my people approaching. Set aside the women, the children, and lead the warriors to this feast of blood preparing. Those enemies of ours who are so ready to tell us who may be our king are going to charge upon those defenseless settlers from the south. Our mech-dinos are going to charge upon their rear, catch them against the shore and against the Ihuan soldiery—weak as it is. You lead the newcomers down upon the melee, swift and hard. Strike from the north as they are heading."

"Those arrows of your people will not pierce the metal of the mech-beasts. How will they fight?"

"Show them how to rope the legs of the mech, how to approach from the blind side. They will prove troublesome enough, will they not?"

"That way, yes! The beasts can be overturned.

"But you will do yourself a disservice: those soldiers from the south will observe how the strange dinos are not real beasts, will observe how they may be overthrown. Your chief weapon against the Empire of the South will be lost you!"

"They will be at first overawed with the revelation of the magic within the beasts. I will invite them to join our forces—a ruler must grow, have many peoples. They will fear to refuse because to them this is mighty magic. We will have more people than ever—is that not good?"

"You are right. I had not thought of that. I obey."

The old man got into one of the beasts, the hillside opened before him, he went out into the sunlight, a lumbering dinosaur.

Gur got his men into the rest of the beasts. Two hundred strong they filed out into the heat, lumbered and creaked away to the south. Inside the lead beast, sitting beside the dark-haired little driver, Gur exulted, thinking what a surprise the enemy cavern dwellers were going to get

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when the Ongwee warriors struck, after his first charge had penned them against the river.

CHAPTER IV

"And all the Lords shall be called Apollo. And they shall inspire men to make images of stone and wood. And the images shall have short arms and long legs; and nails instead of claws on the fingers, and well formed mouths," with shapes for motion of the cheeks.

"He cometh to the young mother's dream, and shapeth her unborn, with limbs like a racer. He standeth in the idol, and knoweth the mother's prayer..."

The Book Of Apollo

THE NEWCOME colonizers, soft city people from the cities of Om, stood about looking at the ruins of the place that had been built to receive them. The stench of rotting bodies in the sun was nauseating, the grasses and thickets seemed filled with the threat of death. "What sort of beasts were these who leveled a city as though touched by the hand of God?"

Their Ongwee hunters pointed out that the tracks were of a horde of dinosaurs. The great snakes had smashed over the whole place, leaving nothing alive. Even as they stood there in indecision, over the brow of the hill came lumbering the column of the beasts, stopped and looked at the victims waiting, gathered themselves into a great mass for an annihilating charge.

"Back to the boats," screamed the officers of the armed warriors, knowing they had nothing that would stop such a magic as was evident in the column of evidently disciplined beasts. Such a thing was unheard of.

The people and the soldiers fled toward the ships that had just disgorged them. Down upon their disorganized flight, as fast as their mech would drive them, came the thundering herd of queer beasts.

Even as their charge gathered headway, over the curve of the hills to the north came a column of the beasts even larger than their own. Unobserved by the down-driving mech-beasts, their round eyes pointing only toward the river, down upon them thundered Gur's warriors in the beasts, and Gur's heart exulted, for he saw now how they might be overcome.

And even as this apparently double doom smashed down through the thickets upon the colonists, came the Ongwee from Lake Vid screeching a war-cry from five hundred fierce throats. Surely never were colonists met by so mighty a mass of destruction.

As the three forces rushed together from three divergent directions, that happened which Gur could never understand.

Down from the heaven's blue flashed a long fiery streak, capped by a silver magic of grace; and suddenly before the charging war-angry beasts appeared the vast silvery bulk of such a thing as had only been seen by men in dreams, or heard of in the old tales of the Gods from the skies.

Huge it was as a fleet of hundreds of ships. Still and beautiful, shimmering in the heat of the sun, twelve feet from the ground it hung. From its sides streamed strange and lovely rays by the hundred, out upon the rushing forces of war and death.

Gur felt the rays, and a great peace came upon him, peace such as only a God could give a man. No more would he say the Gods were the prating of old men. For there hung the God-magic in front of them, and upon them came the great good peace of will which was told of long ago.

The great mech-beasts lumbered to a halt, the doors in the sides opened, the small dark men came out

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and walked peacefully toward the great ship. Gur got out, the old man in the fore of the charging Ongwee force got out, everybody came out of their protective chambers in the mech-beasts—and the whole of the war-faring forces walked peacefully toward the ship of strange magic.

The colonists, frozen with fear a moment before, now turned, their flight forgotten, and stood beside the ship, waiting for the God to speak. For nothing but a God could appear so suddenly where before had been empty space.

GLORY CAME out of the strange gleaming ship of space—glory, tall and well shaped, glittering with gold and colored garments, horned Apollo, grave Phaeja, beautiful, womanly Cimiad.

Three gigantic man-Gods, tall as great trees. They stood above the people, their hands held out in benediction over the upturned faces.

The immortals were forty to sixty feet tall, and their voices boomed like the wind of a storm; and their words, although of another tongue, were clear to the people because of the rays from the ship which spread a magnetic field of thought-conductive which conveyed the thought meaning as well as the words to them.

"My people," spoke Apollo, "I have come to care for this earth. It has been given into my charge after much heavenly neglect on its far course through space where no God dwells. This war you are engaged in will stop; you will join together as one to work for the rule of your lord Apollo, and my teachings shall be your way of life. Beauty I will give your children—peace and plenty for your lives I bring—and the great beasts who slay you I will destroy. If there be a way to set the feet of men upon the paths of greatness I will find it."

The power and intent of the Lord Apollo was seen clearly by their human minds because by the conductive rays, they saw with the mind of a God.

Thus seeing what great good fortune had come to them in this aid from the stars, they fell on their knees as one person, weeping for gratitude. Visions of what life could be—a paradise on earth—came to them from the God-mind. They knew what gifts of wisdom and pleasure there were for the God to give them, and they wanted such things more than life.

Phaeja walked carefully among the prostrate people, a little telaug in his great hand, taking readings; and ever he touched one of the more intelligent of these people on the shoulder and at the touch the vast vitality of the God body flowed into them, filling them with power and understanding, and they rose to their feet and walked toward Apollo because they knew they were so commanded.

When some fifty such were selected, Apollo spoke.

"These chosen will be your leaders, those who will bring my teachings to you, those who will lead you in our wars against the evil of this world. They will be respected as instruments of the Lord and must answer only to me for their decisions, for their deeds. Go now, and rebuild this city for all."

Gur had been selected as a leader and was somewhat surprised to see Suima standing by his side. He nudged her, his mind in a whirl from the sudden turn of events, from the actual appearance of something he had thought must exist only in some intangible way.

Suima turned her sweet face to him, her golden hair aureoling from

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the electric force of life she had absorbed from the body-electric of the mighty Phaeja when he had touched her.

"I, too, was selected, my brave Gur —you are not alone in your clever mind; I also have such a mind."

"My little Suima is not only beautiful, she is also clever," murmured Gur, pleased.

WITH THE great ship standing now on the ground—and its vast power rays reaching out to do the lifting, its tiny dis-rays to do the cutting and shaping, the humans present only for measurements and for planning how the structures were to lie, the city rose within days to a mighty size, big enough for a dozen times the number of people present. Gur realized the city was to be the center of a vast growth of organization of these peoples, and said nothing, but he could not help thinking that all this was already prepared and waiting in the caverns where the machines lay waiting to build more mech-dinos—and his thought was noticed by Apollo.

Apollo called the man to him, looking down on Gur interestedly; for he was the first human he had seen when he had returned at last to this earth from the skies.

"Your thought is troubled. Speak, Gur of the Normaks of the Ongwee, what is it that troubles you?"

"All this labor of building, would it not be better to use the caverns of the hidden dino men, where I have lived of late? They have there vast empty cities under earth, full of machines and wisdom waiting for the student to learn. Why do you not use those places?"

"There are two reasons, my son. These people will appreciate and care for and love a city they have helped to build and can understand. In those Elder caves it is all too easy. It is all ready and waiting; they do not have to learn how to build a machine, they have only to touch the button and the machine works. Knowing what I know, I know that to use those places for the growth of healthy sane peoples of might and wisdom will not work, as there is no need for real effort. All has been provided. There could be no growth there. The people would grow weak and puny away from the sun and from the turmoil of the surface life. It is not good."

Gur was dissatisfied. His face showed that he thought it much better to move into the cavern with all these people and begin to learn the way of the people who had built the places originally.

"To teach you that I am right, I am going to let you take those of your comrades you wish, and those of the people whose ruler you displaced who wish to go back with you, and go back to that cavern and make a life for yourselves. You will soon see that I am right. Otherwise you will be dissatisfied."

"You need me here, where the work and the activity and the plan is going forward. Back there in the holes of rock, what will there be for me to do? I cannot plan a war, for the peoples will all be under your officers; I cannot hunt, the snakes will be slain by you!"

As he spoke, a resentment rose up in Gur that this great one should have upset all his life and his ambitions and his plans, and shown him how little and puny were his mind and his future compared to what it might be. And Gur, notwithstanding the great awe and gratitude he bore toward the mighty being, said:

"I had planned to conquer these people and the other people who ride the false snakes and make them one under me and this whole land my own, the

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property of Gur. You have done all this without striking a blow, but the effort and work of my life are gone; there is nothing for me to live for. I will take my brothers and my comrades and go, and wrest for myself another place from the wilderness or another cavern from the darkness, and will not have to live with the mighty light of your wisdom plaguing me with my own puny worth continually."

Gur turned on his heel and went out of the presence. After him went a score of the Ongwee who had heard him, and a score of the people of the cavern who had helped him the first days of his rule.

Sadly Apollo looked after this one who had not enjoyed the advent of a greater, and then he looked at Cimiad. Cimiad returned his look knowingly.

"You are right, beloved. It is woman's work."

She hastened after Gur, her tallness and beauty that of the Goddess she was, full forty feet tall. Her long strides overtook the group of savage warriors almost at once. They had paused to gather together their belongings. She stood before them, casting her glorious mind into their own, seeking to inspire there, love and trust and a desire to serve and make the glory of the wisdom of the God-race grow on earth.

Gur looked up at her sullenly, loving her woman-beauty, made by the growth of time and the terrific health and strength of an immortal a multiple of the beauty and attraction of an ordinary woman. Still within Gur in spite of the vast pleasure of her presence, was a knowledge that he was nothing—and Gur did not appreciate being nothing when for a short time he had tasted the sweets of power.

"GUR, THE brave, you make a great mistake in your thinking. Under Apollo you can become a great Lord, full of wisdom and strength. With his knowledge in your mind, you can even in time learn the secrets of immortality, leave this earth and take to space as a Lord of the far trails of the stars. That is what Apollo once was, such as yourself; but he did not place his own thought before the thought of the greater one. Can you not understand love, Gur? The master loves you and each of these people because he is a greater one, and his heart is great and able to love each one. You will always get fair dealing, and his plans will be vastly more satisfying to work out than your own puny ones."

"They are at least my own," Gur answered sullenly, not fully seeing her meaning.

"I ask you to give this Lord a trial, Gur. You may not serve him except willingly—it is not allowed. But you have known him but this short while. Give his ways a month—two months—a year—before you decide that it is better to be free and alone. He has come to this world only to bring order and peace and safety and wisdom, not to usurp your power and your privilege as you see it. He is above these things, and presently so will you be also. Stay awhile, Gur and learn what love and wisdom can be." And Cimiad cast the full revealment of her inner beauty into the mind of Gur and brought him mentally to her feet in a slavish adoration.

"For you, I will stay and try to like it. But these great males, Phaeja and Apollo—I bristle at them like a dog to another. I see the light of love for them in Suima's eyes, and I cannot stand that."

"In your own eyes, now, what is

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there that shines for me?"

"That is true, Cimiad."

"Suima is also jealous of me. She loves you. Even with the great male presence of Apollo before her, she still loves you, Gur. And you were going away from her, to break her heart forever. Is that good?"

"I will stay, then, and see how these things work out. It may be that they are beyond my understanding."

"I need you and Suima for reasons. Do you want to labor for me, and not for Apollo? Then you and Suima can be together?"

"That is infinitely better, Cimiad. I can understand your heart, while his is a great secret to me."

GUR WAS somewhat troubled in mind as he realized more every day that these Gods, whom the Rabbahs had always taught were spirits, and not material, were very definitely flesh and blood like himself. Gur deduced that the other times of the Gods' descent to earth they had been flesh and blood and muscle and metal wonder-work as well.

As the days went by, several more ships made their sudden landings from the sky, and a legion of mighty warriors drilled on the great plains of the Gomagat. With them, learning to work with them, drilled Gur and his Ongwee, his cavern people and their mechanical dinosaurs, and the people from the south, the city dwellers, the Ihuans of the bandy legs and ugly faces.

Gur's mind was also troubled by the reason for the Gods' presence. He could not reconcile his practical analysis of motives with Apollo's effort. Why did he spend his time and effort for these primitive people? What was in it for him? Phaeja noticed these puzzling thoughts in Gur's mind and made him an answer.

"You see, Gur, we belong to a mighty organization of space governments—very huge, many, many planets as well as great cities built in the ether itself of metal and plastic, as big as planets but very light with little gravity. This master government has a use for everything and a reward for every effort. If we make this planet into a huge factory of production of these things we need, make it worth taking into the union, we get a reward. That reward will consist in greater responsibilities as well as of greater means of gratifying certain ambitions we have for research and experiment with life forms. One of Apollo's reasons for being here is to prove a theory he has as to how the race—any race—can be vastly improved in hereditary beauty and strength of mind by certain methods which you will see him apply as the organization of the planet proceeds."

Phaeja looked at Gur, who was listening attentively. Satisfied he understood, Phaeja rested the huge ray he was swinging across the far landscape, taking a count of the beasts to get an average estimate of the labor required to get rid of them.

"There is also another, bigger reason. That is, the sun up there is due to begin throwing off certain terrible emanations within the year. Those rays will change all life for the worse on earth, and lose its value to the God race forever unless we find a way to circumvent those effects by establishing counter force. Great generators of damping and neutralizing magnetic fields must be set up all over the planet to repel those waves. If we do not get this done, those waves will madden all life on the planet, degenerate every mind into a killing mechanism. Blood and war alone will rage over the planet. Every great peaceful foliage-eater will turn into a maddened beast that will slay whatever approaches it, and the whole

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progress of the planet will be set back beyond redemption. This is a terrible thing to happen to the sweet young race represented by such as Suima. There are perhaps a million of sweet creatures like Suima over this planet, and it is to save that seed of the future represented by such as her that we are making this effort. Do you see now why we did not let you go your own way into war and conquest and foolishness without our guiding hand?"

Gur looked up at the noble head of Phaeja. An impetuous, bristle-mustached face it was, broad brow and short nose, wide round eyes snapping a strange eager fire, little round ears and a round strong chin. The whole fire-eating aspect of him was somehow belied by a cool nobility of judgment sitting behind the eyes and Gur understood Phaeja as like himself somewhat: one whose warlike nature must be continually curbed by a strong rein of judgment which sometimes fails to function. "If you speak truth, I can understand why you are here. It is because you have loved such good, simple creatures as Suima long ago and feel you owe a debt to the mother; Mi, the planet which bore them. Is that not so?"

"That is very true, my Gur. Apollo himself was a son of this planet long, long ago, and owes his mother every effort he can make for her. Her future depends on our work. Now will you get in the harness properly?"

GUR FILLED himself with the strange eager fire of haste from Phaeja's eyes, and went and had a long talk with the old man whom he had come to use as the link between himself and the strange, cold people of the caverns, as well as a long talk with the Elder men of his own Ongwees. And after that the work went much better.

In a great circle, out from the city they had built upon the ruins of the Ihuan colony, went their army, steadily clearing away all the beasts, the great snakes, all the useless savage life entirely.

At distances of two hundred miles apart the giant men from space built great towers of shining metal topped by round balls of metal mesh—and in the great stone buildings they constructed beneath, they set vast metal generators humming. From the round balls began to hum out a mighty field of power, a strange cool power of electric that bathed all things for a hundred miles in a soft crackling of electric. This electric Gur found was vastly healthful. The weariness one noticed after a few hours of sunlight no longer came, but instead one was fresh the whole day through. He began to understand what the Great Ones were about.

Every day one of the great ships flashed skyward with a roar, and every day one landed, loaded with hundreds of tons of supplies for the building. Sweeping in great arcs over the plains, the ships that were detailed to the work slew hundreds of the roaming beasts with the dis-rays, and their stench was on the breeze like a pestilence. The plains of the Gomagat were nearly all under the new reign when the sun trouble began. Apollo's face grew more and more grave as the sun changed from day to day, becoming ever redder and more sullen and oppressive. The heat was terrible outside of the artificial protection of the great towers of repellant electric which screened the worst rays of the sun.

Up from the unprotected southlands of Om came wave after wave of maddened beasts, the heat and the de-rays of the sun having changed them from peaceful herbivores into savage, racing hordes of killers,

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trampling all before them.

Now their legions of builders, their fighting planes which swept over along the borders, might not venture out into the areas unprotected by the shielding magnetic fields from the great towers. Instead all the efforts were expended in swiftly enlarging this area by building ever more great towers on the rims of the protected area. Built within the rim of shielding force, they extended the protection ever outward in a great circle.

But the work went far too slowly for Apollo.

NEAR TO Apollo's realm in etherea, lay the possessions of Ashtoroth. Ashtoroth was a beautiful, lascivious, lawless and self-willed female, who inherited vast power from her father—Osiris. Baal, her consort and friend, and Ashtoroth, as well as the older Osiris, were false Gods—that is, they denied the power of the Creator, and set themselves up as rulers in their own right. Their main reason for cutting loose from the Federation of Etherean States of which the Creator was heard, was to avoid giving up their warriors and workers to the service of the Federation; but also they wanted the freedom from restrictions upon their activities. So long as they did not enter into active war against the organized space powers, they were tolerated, left alone.

As earth, on its course through space with the other bodies of the group called the Serpent, on the great orbit in space, passed through borders of Apollo's realm, it also passed through a corner of the area in space which was under the hand of Ashtoroth.

It was not the passing of the little planetary system that called her attention, but a message from Apollo. The message said:

"The Serpent passeth through your lands. Only madness and death awaits life upon this planet called earth, and upon the other planets of this sun, for the sun has gone into the 'de' stage of degeneration, which all such burning bodies pass into in time. In case you think to annex this planet and its people, I must warn you that yourself cannot stay long on this planet without madness and the horror of age coming upon you."

Ashtoroth, reading the message, laughed with curling luxurious lips. "This glorious sycophant of the even more glorious Creator thinks to be-fool me from the conquest of these teeming people with a lie. I will just take a look at this earth. It is said to be the original birthplace of the great Apollo. He seems pretty healthy to source upon a planet of age and death."

Down, now, toward the Red Star, the planet Earth, shrinking smaller and smaller from out of the tenuous grades of solidity of her own etherean planes of being, the contractile dynamos plugging a deep drone of power through all the tenuous atoms of her ship. Smaller and smaller into the densities of the grade of solidity of Earth, came her great vagnacraft, the *Viperfang* of Ashtoroth.

Huge and sensual in the cabin of controls, Ashtoroth, the beautiful, proud and merciless, waited, her deep black eyes intent upon the new source of life that swam now through the rim of her Etherean Empire. Denser and denser grew her ship and her body, and the bodies of her monstrous crew of robots and outlaw warriors, closer and closer came the earth.

Now, swooping suddenly down upon the southern hemisphere of Earth, her view rays surveyed the primitive peoples and primal forests, the completely savage land she pro-

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posed to make her own. Unknowing that in the Northern hemisphere Apollo and his legions of warriors and skilled engineers were laboring to lift the magnetic field of earth out of its terrible sun "de" inductive atunement, and thus free the life-planet from its evil, unknowing that Apollo planned to make the planet safe for the man-culture experiments he planned, unknowing that she was setting herself up against the mighty Lord of the Etherean realms, who had ordered Apollo to right the affairs of Earth, unknowing even, in her ignorance of the past before her birth that earth was an ancient home of the God race itself once upon a time, unknowing that this earth was anything but a savage and unsettled planet that Apollo had thought to keep from her by a lie, an earth that was anyone's claim, her ship landed. After it, swimming down through plane of density after plane of density, from the vast expansion used by their science to traverse the endless infinitudes of ether, came her armies within her vast navy of ships and the cargo craft carrying her endless supplies for the building she planned.

NOW SWOOPING down upon the southern half of the globe, the great vagnacraft planed the thin air of the stratosphere as its density still increased, and its size decreased.

Below lay awesome primal forests untouched by organized men for an age, teeming with savage life, gigantic beasts and the terrific sized reptiles of the age of dinosaurs, vast yellow tinted seas swarming with aquatic life.

She did not know, nor would have cared greatly to know, that in the North would land the Legions of Apollo to train there and to build to make the planet safe for the man-culture experiments he planned. In fact, she planned certain experiments in tecto-genetics herself, but her purposes were far from the noble motivations of the God Apollo.

Ashtoroth was in some ways an ignorant outlaw among the cultured ancient wisdom-gatherers of the vast realms of the Etherean worlds, but in other ways Ashtoroth's education had been intensive, and the scientific methods used to promote the pleasures of life into an intricate fabric of continuous ecstasy were to her as a primer to the teacher.

Her purposes in landing upon this savage, untouched planet were a mixture of mischievous curiosity as to what she could do with its numerous life-forms in bringing about startling and numerous new life-forms, and watching the ensuing chaos resulting from tampering with the natural progressions of life. Her education had been onesided, true, but it had been thorough.

She took a sensual delight, a sadistic thrill, in certain facets of this tecto-genetic science, the whole science of the God races was essentially one of the study of life, its causes and changes, the reasons for its protean developments, and her own fascination with the science was a product of sensual impulses within her mind.

A woman may dream of a man as strong as a bull embracing her. Ashtoroth could dream in a more actual way, and by her work with gene cultures, with stripped chromosomes, with beneficial rays and culture nutrient solutions, by micro-surgery and their combination in the science of tecto-genetics, she could reproduce in a short, quick growing time, a man who was half bull, and who became of adult size in a short span of forced growth. In her endlessly active and sexually hungry mind her libido insisted upon performing such imagery of transformations, delighted in vis-

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ualizing vast phantasmagoriae of life in multiform variation, all bent to forms to suit her cravings for sensual variety and power over life. That impulse in Apollo which was leading him to remake man into a greater and more beautiful thing, was in Ashtoroth an irresistible impulse to remake man as well as animals into another sad thing, a thing mentally enslaved from birth to certain channels of thought that worked out into a life-pattern of a certain horrible kind that satisfied her cravings, her perverted appetites, that infinitely pleased her weirdly out-of-joint ideals of beauty.

Months went swiftly by as she laid the few sparse peopled kingdoms of Africa under her domination, as she found the caverns under Africa where the Elder race had left much that she found of value and interest to her heretofore unknowing mind, which had never contracted any of the ancient works of the beginnings of the life of the Edler race that now ruled space and had forgotten it's lowly beginnings upon the little Earth.

Within those forgotten caverns she built for herself a vast system of laboratories. Swiftly her great rock melting rays bored new and suitable chambers to fit her great size and a veritable factory of production of multiplicate polymorphic life-forms sprang up under her hands. Around her awful kingdom grew a bizarre, heterogeneous non-comformity of monstrous aberrations from the theme of life. She made such improvizations by the thousands, and released so many of the unsuccessful experimental animals that the plains of Africa swarmed with the by-products of her handiwork—the griffin, the centaur, the elephant, the giraffe, the hippogriff, the hydra are but a few, some of which survive till today to tell us of the awful handiwork of this adventuress in the science of tecto-genetics.

Ashtoroth created much for the mere pleasure in seeing what would happen next when she distorted the germs of life with her rays, her cell surgery, her perfusion solutions, her mixtures of pure genes which combined into any mad life-form her brain could conceive.

WHILE MUCH of this was pure experimentation to see what would happen next, she had a darker purpose in her work, a purpose hidden from all but herself, a purpose which would, if successful, place her in control of far vaster dominions and far vaster sources of the materials of ecstatic and immortal debauchery than any other monarch of space.

To magnify the sperm and egg of divergent species, to treat this or that portion with tiny stimulating growth rays, while with minute cut-ray needles she killed another portion of micro-surgery, to mate the products of this micro-surgery and to raise the offspring to maturity swiftly in their forcing incubators was an ancient science long before the birth of Ashtoroth. That Ashtoroth was a kind of comprachico, a producer of purposeful and pitiful monstrosities, was not new. There had been others before her for ages, and the practice had its profitable side. There was a huge market for these peculiar life forms in the pleasure palaces that flourished in the outlawed areas of space.

The introduction into this science of these forbidden procedures, to produce these sensually useful though monstrous creatures, was a branch of science that lived in technical virtuosity only among such outlaws as Ashtoroth had gathered about her. That the study and practice of this science should become an appetite, a

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terrible obsession, is *understandable only to those who have experienced super-stim rays* and their hypnotic effect, their diabolical insistence upon increased functional operation of the primal urge and its consequent domination of the life-course.

Thus for a year of her fearfully superhuman activity, earth and its numerous life-forms were subject to the whims of this etherean ecstatic, this sensual product of a debauched way of life beyond the mortal human's power of visualization, a life of pleasure of a vastness and wasteful multiplexity for which we have no word but the Moor's "Paradise", or "Nirvana" or perhaps the lower concepts of Heaven.

Due to her having taken up her dwelling within the hidden and sealed Elder caverns under the African surface, neither Ashtoroth nor her activities were observed by the scout planes' ray eyes of Apollo's preliminary survey of earth. The work of building the sun "de" shields over the northern hemisphere was well forward before they even knew that Ashtoroth had touched the earth at all.

LITTLE Suima, among the others had been sent by Cimiad to make a survey of the Northern plains of Africa preparatory to setting up a camp there.

At that time, Ashtoroth was out with her beaters, hunting. Hunting, to her, was a process of trapping all the animals as well as men that she could gather in. These she used as a source of plasma, filling her vats with the raw stuff from which she created an ichor, a fluid which supported the accelerated growth which her own body demanded as well as the experimental creatures she manufactured. This manufacture provided her with both slaves and amusement. Her armies were made up of mercenary warriors she had hired and recruited in the great cities of the etherean worlds.

Seeing the extensive, glittering caravan of the mighty Ashtoroth, Suima shut off the jets of her little scout plane, swooped down to investigate. As she slowed and circled, a great ray reached up from the degravitized pavilion where Ashtoroth lay in her ever-pleasure of super-stim, sheltered there from the daily increasing rudeness of the African sun, pinned the tiny craft in its magnetic beam, pulled it down...

The tiny Suima was led before the tremendous, sensual figure dominating the utterly luxurious pavilion—and little Suima's innocent eyes widened in fascinated horror as she took in the terrific complexity of evidences of Ashtoroth's immortal and complete and passionate absorption in utter self-indulgence.

Ashtoroth herself was enough to widen the eyes of one who had formed her ideas of the Gods from the relatively austere and clean intellectual beauty of Apollo's mighty features, the great horned head topping his lean muscular strength. Or from Cimiad's wholly warm and human, dark and appealing and sympathetic immortal womanhood. Ashtoroth was not of that stripe, however.

Her wide, luxurious lips curved in a sensual, lazy smile, her great teeth glittered as she savored the sport to be had from introducing this innocent child mind to all the complex temptations of her, Ashtoroth's, daily regimen. This little envoy of whom? Ashtoroth wondered, of *whom?*

Her thoughts searched Suima's fragile mind as Suima in turn searched with her eyes the vast engulfing sensuality of beauty of Ashtoroth's dominating figure. The black, deep eyes, half hidden under drooping sultry

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lids, the curled and perfumed midnight hair, the great smooth lure of her breasts outthrusting, and the smooth glistening oiled skin of her graceful limbs negligently tossed in an abandon of relaxed pleasure under the heavy, mind enthralling throb of the intoxicating stim rays that one knew were always upon her. The glittering mesh of intricately fragile golden links about her incongruously thin waist, the strong augmented aura of her too-vital body electric surrounding her and all things in the pavilion's circumference with her possessing will-to-power that engulfed the self of the weaker onlooker, a will to power that was as well a will-to-pleasure.

Ashtoroth was one to upset all Suima's recently acquired ideas of what a Goddess should look like and of what was and what was not God-like.

Suima, in spite of herself, bowed her head to the sensing of this overmastering will of Ashtoroth, and at this the strong thought of the outlaw Goddess swept through her mind, the barriers down, leaping from fact to fact of what Suima represented.

"You know Apollo?" asked Ashtoroth, her deep contralto humming through the place, revealing in every soft note the inward hedonism, the activating sexual principle that was her soul. And even as she asked, Suima knew she was projecting on the screens of her vast mind the scene of her future meeting with Apollo, and whether the virtues of the God's nature would triumph over her tempting, or whether he would allow her to go her way in what she called peace. And as Suima thought of the word *peace*, she looked about at the warriors and armed slaves thronging the great circular chamber, basking in the reflected rays and vaporized nutrients of the chamber, some the bodies of men with the heads of animals; the great lion that lolled beside her and violated all the laws of God and man with its head, the human head of a blond giant, weirdly displaying in its lines the effects of its lion blood; behind the great throne a line of strong black men with the heads of leopards; and across the chamber an armed guard of gigantic warriors, men with a weird *something* distorting all their form, so that Suima, with her innocent untutored mind, could not imagine why they were not as other men, but knew that they were not men as she knew them. Their bodies, twenty feet in height, half as great as the Goddess' own mighty form, glistened with revolting dew. Their skin was faintly mottled as a lizard's skin, their hands webbed, but long and human in shape. Suima turned away her eyes, and looked again into the faintly curious and oddly mocking eyes of Ashtoroth.

"Sit here beside me and tell me everything you wish about yourself. No human who is protected by the glorious Apollo need fear the anger of Ashtoroth." The Goddess leaned forward and extended her great rosy palm to Suima in the gesture of peace, taking her tiny hand as she advanced, showing her where to sit beside her knee. The calculating gleam in her eyes told Suima that she was planning something, that herself was of some value to that plan, but it was beyond her to fathom the complexities of the heard thought of the mighty being.

EVEN as she seated herself beside the subtly smiling Goddess, sleep came upon her, and Suima closed her eyes. And upon a great cubical screen of force suddenly erected before Ashtoroth, all the inward thoughts of Suima came alive, and Ashtoroth's

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own thought probed the sleeping mind of the girl so that displayed before her was all of her knowledge of the plans and work of Apollo, and of Phaeja, and of Cimiad—and dark were her great black brows at seeing the face of Cimiad within the mirroring force screen. For Cimiad was an enemy of old time! A slight smile played upon her lips to see the face of Phaeja. A calculating smile that boded ill for someone. Particularly did she smile to see that Phaeja and Apollo were both attentive to Cimiad, and the possibilities there intrigued her mightily.

OVER this weird scene of Suima's capture by the powerful Ashtoroth, the sun glowered redly, and Apollo on the other side of earth, looking upward, knew that madness for all earth was near at hand. But this knowledge of the steady increase of the sun's production of the deadly de force ions was understood and possessed in its entirety only by himself, on earth.

Apollo had extended his conquest from the Lakes of Vid and Sajins, east and west to the ocean, and south to the borders of Om. Now ever southward pushed his ships, clearing the land of the more dangerous carnivores. After these came armies of scouts. Many of these were of the Ongwee, under Gur. After these came the armies of builders, constructing the great towers and dynamos to generate the protective field Apollo proposed to throw over most of earth.

Gur's job was dangerous and one well suited to his talents. After the first cleansing of the next site of construction by the rays from the great warships of the air, his army of bowmen, preceded by a few score of the lumbering dino-tanks, came directly to the next site to complete the job of making the area safe for unarmed workmen. Rounding up the few remaining big snakes in the area, searching out settlements of humans who might prove troublesome, and placating or conquering them, setting up a guard to keep the peace and protect the workmen from any chance monster or raid, then pushing on to the next site.

To Cimiad had been given the continent now called Europe, then called Orupe, and in the north her armies found little resistance. In the south they had crossed the Mediterranean and were pushing south into Egypt. The armies of Cimiad were all female warriors, for the most part her own contracted Ethereans, but some few were, like Suima, earth women undergoing training.

CHAPTER V

Ashtoroth said: "By the flesh of my thighs am I sworn, this thing shall not be."

GUR WAS uneasy. Since Suima had been detailed to Cimiad, and himself retained by Apollo because of his experience with the peoples of the Ephsu, he had not seen her. He knew they were on the other side of the world, but his ideas of the world and how far the other side might be were rather hazy. Lately he felt depressed; forebodings as to Suima's well-being had settled on him. He was a man longing for his mate. Not that he thought of her as his mate; he just wanted Suima.

He was not greatly surprised when Apollo sent for him and told him that Suima had failed to return from a scouting flight. He looked at the great grave eyes of the tall God, gigantic among the other giants of his company, and asked:

"Must I stay here, where I am not too greatly required, while she may be dying? Give me leave to search for

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her."

Even as they talked, a great airship of strange design circled, landed outside the pavilion of Apollo. A Looi dashed in with the cry:

"A plane arrives from Ashtoroth. She must be on earth!"

"Go and see what the pilot desires." Apollo seemed unruffled. To Gur it meant nothing. He did not realize that this was the first move in a gigantic contest of wits that might lead to terrible war among the Gods themselves.

The pilot proved to be a great black giant, one of Ashtoroth's Loois, called Anobun. He carried a message sealed with the fiery heart that was Ashtoroth's sign. Apollo unrolled the scroll, frowning, and read silently. Gur, undismissed, stood waiting an answer to his request.

The great leader turned to Gur.

"This Ashtoroth, among other things, tells me she has met with Suima, and is entertaining her as a very charming visitor, and requests whether or no she may keep her indefinitely, as she is interested in her. She also requests a visit from me, to determine what my attitude toward her residence on this planet may be. Gur, methinks you will see your little Suima very soon. For I will visit this she-demon at once."

Several of the gigantic men from space stepped forward, their hands raised in warning, speaking all at once in alarm.

"Not in person, O leader. She may plan to destroy you and thus win her designs at one stroke. This cannot be!"

"How do we know she has designs? Has not just stopped here for curiosity's sake? I must talk with her in person."

"You can't walk into her camp alone, unarmed. It is not good sense, O Lord."

"She presents an invitation to peaceful conference. It must be accepted. I want to be there to read her face, and her thought if she is not wary. I have never seen this female, but have heard a great deal. I just might want to favor her."

"It is playing into her hands. You know her works of old. Why take the chance? What is to be gained?"

"Maybe the lives of the lot of you. How do we know what she has planned in case we are enemies? We must give her no cause to think we suspect her of evil designs.

"Phaeja, you take our swiftest planes, make a survey of her strength as quickly as you can. Meanwhile I will ready the rest of our fleet for immediate war if she so chooses. As soon as you report, we will visit her—in force! Does that please you alarmists?"

The gigantic crew nodded assent, and action hastened their limbs from the vast pavilion. Gur was left alone with the Lord Apollo.

The great one smiled upon Gur.

"Twill not be long before you see your beloved, Gur. And maybe action too, if Ashtoroth proves as proud and wilful and wrong-headed as her reputation."

"Who is Ashtoroth?" asked Gur.

"She is one of a number of Gods, Osiris and Baal and others, who seek to found a power independent of the God of Gods whom I serve. Not for any grievance, but only to sate their appetites and pleasure themselves without obeying the law that says: To every one his right to exist and grow as is best for him. These individuals such as Ashtoroth, when they grow wise, find many strange pleasures denied them, for to sate themselves they must deprive others of the rights our God guarantees. You will understand this better after you have seen Ashtoroth and learned of her ways, seen what she and those

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like her do to life-forms. Great power, when it is greedy, can be very depressing to all life under it."

A WEEK passed in swift preparation, and Phaeja returned.

"She has not half our strength in sight, but what she may have hidden away underground I cannot say. There is no sign of preparation for a trap."

The armada of Apollo took the air at once. The thunder of the jets of the fleet was a vast roar across the land. The Ephsu faded behind them; they were over the broad blue Atlantic, a vast V of great warships of space, arrowing through the air of earth.

In that sea swam monsters, gargantuan, cavern-mawed, thewed and finned, clawed and toothed—a vast sea-life of unending, ravening violence. Ever from the waves thrust a nightmare head, to disappear in a swirl followed by the slicing fin of some pursuer, surfacing only to dive in grim attendance to the death.

Over those seas of endless contention over food, the fleet of Apollo was the peace of logical life, ordered and designed, on its way to build the power of designed life upon this chaotic globe. And their goal was a great power for the very chaos they sought to overcome—Ashtoroth, the lustful, who sought ever greater power over men to sate her appetites.

So did Gur think, watching the swift shadow of the fleet upon the white-capped waves. So did Apollo think, and Gur did not realize he was but reflecting the heard thought of the mighty God-mind in lesser images.

The Pillars of Hercules fled beneath, the vast sea-shadow of the fleet sped across the blue Mediterranean, across the forested coast lands and out upon the great grass plains covering what is now the Sahara.

There her camp, near to the Nile, not far from the great Temple of Osiris, now called the Great Pyramid. And Apollo bethought him how Osiris was the tutelary father, if not the actual father, of this Ashtoroth, and wondered why she was here where Thothma had built the great Temple to her father. There, with the quiet Nile water in the distance, and the waving grasses a great sea of shimmering green around her pavilion, waited the forces guarding the mighty Ashtoroth, a Goddess whose power, mysteriously, grew ever greater in spite of the opposition of the God of Gods.

Rank on rank were her space ships, waiting. Rank on rank were great land tanks which had been brought out of these ships. And rank on rank were the formal guard about her pavilion. Beautiful in the sun was all the polished metal of the ships, the armed raytanks, the weapons of her warriors, busy on their military errands. The bustle of the armed camp was bright luxury to the eyes.

But there was horror there for the eyes of Apollo, and for Gur, and for Phaeja—for their eyes were not expecting the full truth of the things they had heard of the works of this Ashtoroth.

The great fleet spiralled, came to earth with vast fury of thunder from their massed jets breaking their weight against earth-pull.

And Apollo, and Gur as his shield bearer, and Phaeja and his man, and other of the great ones of Apollo's officers, stepped forth from their ships. Mighty war-like figures they were in the ominous light of the changing sun. Apollo looked up at that sun, now brazen without the usual magnetic force shield filters he habitually built against the sun de force, and knew that horror would be

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upon this earth before many months had passed. For he knew what that red, brassy violent stare from a sun meant. He knew as he looked about that Ashtoroth did not realize what it meant or she, too, would have built force-shields against it.

It was horror that greeted them, for the ranks of soldiers were not fully men, were the products of the vari-form technique taken by a lewd hand and made into another thing. In the ancient days—the "vari-form technique" was a free-will exercising of a method by which lovers, of divergent life-streams from separate planets could have children if they so desired, and from this method sprang many strange hybrids. It was evident that Ashtoroth had taken the vari-form methods, and had made for herself a people out of sportive desire for variety.

Now, as Apollo looked at the ranks of wolf-headed men, of leopard-headed men, of ape-bodies with men's heads, of reptilian monsters on which had apparently been grafted human parts, he realized that here was deeper mockery of the life-process than mere curious experimentation.

He saw a tendency toward a certain unmentionable end, a deep vileness in this handiwork, a revolt against the Master-God who had seeded all these planets with life in the long, long ago with a certain plan of development in mind, a certain respect for the innate design plans of Nature herself. He saw here the working out of an evil plot to overthrow all the work of the ancient First-Master, to upset the primal design for life, and he knew a deep anger.

These thoughts of Apollo's, from his great strength, reflected in the men of his following, and on each face the anger of their leader was reflected strangely. Phaeja stepped to Apollo's side.

"O my leader, it might be wiser to conceal your anger until we have had time to think about Ashtoroth and just what she means to us and our plans upon earth."

"It is plain enough she has already done us much harm. How can I incorporate these monstrous life-forms into my planned human beauty? How? It is as if she knew all about my orders from the Father, knew in advance what were only thoughts in our minds—and had set herself to thwart us."

With an effort Apollo wiped his anger from his mind, the faces of his companions smoothed into peaceful acceptance of the phantasmal incongruity of the heterogeneous human-beast distortions before them.

TO GUR, looking at the beast-like warriors, occurred the thought: "Where are the women who produced these children in the beginning? Certainly they must be most unattractive creatures!"

Gur looked at Apollo, whose passion for human beauty was well known to him, wondering, but Apollo's face was a schooled mask of unreadable stillness, and his thought was unhearable to Gur.

From the great pavilion beyond the massed ranks of war-equipment came glittering toward them a bejeweled court functionary, a tall, repellant antiquity, white-haired and slim and elegant in his linked mail and jeweled weapon belt, thin white hands fluttering in greeting gestures, his face one great smile of insincere and flattering joy. His words were flowery and ornate with the imagery of the space races, completely enigmatic to Gur.

Striding and grim in their plain war-harness, the gigantic Apollo and his men, some ten of them, followed this emissary toward the pennanted

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and colorfully draped pavilion, round and gaudy with luxurious trapping, from which came soft rich scents and the vibrant hum of greeting stimulant rays, caressing and invigorating and subtly cloying in their sensual appeal to the lower impulses of the body.

One knew, at the touch of those pleasure rays—that within that pavilion waited temptation, a temptation that could not be avoided by reason of the necessity for conference with Ashtoroth. Gur knew that Apollo was glad that Cimiad was not here, and he understood why the Lord was glad.

They entered the perfumed spaces within the mighty structure, and though there were glorious and beautiful sights, all were dwarfed and dominated and unseeable at first glance due to the presence of Ashtoroth upon her throne, rising now and smiling down her greeting to these great men from far and powerful states of the far spaces.

Her body was gleaming with perfumed oils, glittering with many jewels, and the sensual, avidly smiling lips and bold eyes, black and deep and richly eloquent with the vital essense of the electric which is called "ne", the great round forms of her Goddess' breasts, the narrow waist, the swelling near-naked thighs, the terrific appeal to the masculine eyes, all calculated to impress and bewilder the senses. As they came before her, the many greeting pleasure rays swelled in power to a symphony of stimulation of the subtle, will-enslaving kind that is not used except by such as flaunt the regulations placed upon ray uses by the council of space rulers.

In spite of his previous anger, Gur knew the mighty Apollo was favorably impressed by the beauty and intelligence of the Goddess, and himself knew that Ashtoroth as vastly more irresistible than was Cimiad, but he did not know that this was due to her use of rays to overcome the will, was due to an unscrupulous manipulation of their thoughts by unseen ray-attendants. Apollo knew this, but he had expected it for it was not unusual. It only confirmed his opinion that Ashtoroth was unscrupulous and told him that she feared him and desired his friendship so to flaunt all regulations in her use of forbidden electric attractions in such conferences which must of necessity be conducted with all minds perfectly uninfluenced from without. Apollo bowed, not low, but slightly, to the resplendent figure before the throne, and motioned to her to seat herself again. Then he spoke.

"Ashtoroth, is it seemly you should so influence my judgment? You know it is forbidden."

"I did not know the great Apollo had come to pass judgment upon me. I had thought only to greet him pleasantly as a friend, to show him relaxation from his labor." Ashtoroth waved a hand, the many pleasuring rays upon the visiting company ceased, and they stood now before her with all the mental magic of the ray impulses stripped away, seeing Ashtoroth as she was and not as the mental rays of subtle inspiration said she was.

Gur's eyes widened in astonishment at this sudden stripping of the magical illusions from the great form of the woman before him, and realized that there was much poor Gur did not know of the affairs of the great.

For at the cessation of the soft humming rays upon their bodies, the de-field of the sun's magnetic came again into possession of their senses and faculties, the glorious trappings of the pavilion became tawdry drapes across ill-conceived workmanship, the

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glittering throne became just a great seat for the almost gross body of the Goddess. Gur eyed the change in her, the soft glory about her was stripped away, leaving her strangely changed. Still beautiful she was, but her black eyes were heavy and with a strange stare, her great smooth limbs and outthrusting breasts larger than seemed right, her hands too broad and capable for beauty.

NOW GUR, as his eyes adjusted to the sudden change, saw the sun gleam on a soft halo of hair at her feet, upon the top step of the dais, and his heart leaped as he saw the sweet face of Suima wreathed with a smile that spelled the word "home" to his heart. Without thought of the great ones and the mighty issues that might lie at stake about him, Gur leaped impulsively up the steps of the low dais, and lifting Suima to her feet, clasped her to his breast. Strangely, the glory that had been stripped from Ashtoroth seemed to have wafted to a glow around Suima —and the magic that had been Ashtoroth's now had found a dwelling place in her blue eyes. Gur lifted her face with his hand and kissed her blushing cheeks. Never had he known he loved her so much as now. Gur did not hear the soft understanding laughter of the mighty giants around him, did not realize that his action had brought to the strained welcome a note of relief and that both Ashtoroth's officers and Apollo's gigantic leaders were joined in sympathetic amusement at his innocent impulsive action.

Neither did even Apollo realize that the hidden rays of Ashtoroth had brought this about by subtle control of Gur himself, and by playing upon Suima soft and potent though unobservable flow of "ne"—the synthetic essence of all sexual attraction so to cause the very thing that had occurred—a relief to distract the minds of the great ones from the full import of this meeting.

Ashtoroth laughed lightly and clapped her hands. Tables were brought, and food and drink and seats for these mighty visitors. Ashtoroth came down from her throne and took her place at the head of the board. The tables were set in a long line across the round pavilion, and on one side sat Apollo and his officers, and on the other sat the leaders under Ashtoroth.

At the head of the board sat the dark beauty of the Goddess, once again aura'd round with the glory of the "ne" rays, her beauty thus enhanced to the very rim of endurability. And Apollo made no murmur against it, for he realized that there was something boorish about denying a woman her right to be beautiful, no matter how.

Apollo, sitting on the right hand of Ashtoroth, as the feast progressed, engaged the Goddess in conversation—for he wanted vitally to know what she intended on earth.

"O mighty Ashtoroth, do you know that the sun is changing every day to one of greater generation of 'de'; and that both beasts and men will soon be maddened by the sun and run across the land ravening and slaying? That the men of earth not protected against the 'de', will engage in wars, unknowing why—and that most of them will die? Do you know these things, and still stay here on this earth?"

Ashtoroth, her thoughts protected from Apollo's seeking mind by her vigilant unseen rays, conjectured that Apollo was seeking to drive her from the earth peaceably by such warnings, and that they were not true. So she answered:

"I know this is true, O my lord

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Apollo! I do not intend to remain here long. It could be that I have come here only to see and to learn from Apollo—that I knew I should find you here!"

"You flatter me. Your interest in me springs from what?"

"From your mighty masculinity. I am a woman; I wanted to know the great Apollo and to see him."

Apollo bent from his height and looked into the sultry black eyes of the Goddess.

He saw there a molten pit of strange emotions. He could not fathom her, but he was attracted to her. For it is true that attraction between male and female partakes of magnetism; and the greater the magnet in size and strength, the greater the attraction. This fact the cunning Ashtoroth had used by her subtle augmenting stim-rays to make an opening in his armor of indifference.

So she laughed lightly at his side, turned her half revealed body supplely beside his and looked at him with her deep and sultry eyes, smiled at him with curling, enticing lips, and whatever she said seemed to Apollo to be wisdom. The heart of Phaeja leaped within him, for he knew that Cimiad would be his if Apollo turned to another.

Ashtoroth's hidden rays worked subtly, continually, and set all the veins of the God afire with the want of her, so that his judgment was asleep.

But Apollo had been given a task on earth, and his mind was set on that. This Ashtoroth's experiments in human-beasts; beast-humans; in mutants; in controlled mutations; with various micro-operations upon the genes controlling heredity, were vast obstacles to the plan as he saw it set by the ancient beginner of things on this planet and many others. So that the attraction he felt toward her did not overmaster him, but aroused within his own mind a conflict between duty and between his own desires and plans for similar work with human kind but with a greater regard for the subject and a more noble concept of the building of a great race.

"ASHTOROTH, the temptations of individuals with power such as ourselves are numerous and perhaps too great to withstand; but I see around you many products of tectogenetics—I presume you are the author of these constructed species?"

"I have always held that the ancient laws and subservience to tradition in this field of biotechnics were stifling the growth power. I have indulged my love of liberty—perhaps broken all the laws, I don't know. But I have learned a great deal."

"The ancient one, the God of Gods who originated the original life-pattern of this globe and of those from which the modern races sprang is still alive, still all-powerful. This work of yours may have its justifications, but to do what you are doing is to set yourself up against his long term plans. Even I would not dare so much!"

Ashtoroth smiled quizzically at Apollo.

"Wouldn't you...?"

"I would not! This earth is passing into a long period of dis—an era of degeneration. You know something of what suns do when they go into de. The God whom you do not fear, who started the life patterns now paramount, has commissioned me to do certain things. One is to rid the earth of the reptilian plague which devastates it. Another is to set up a counteractive and neutralizing field over the earth, to shut

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out the degenerative rays of the sun, to reduce the effects of the dis period as much as possible, to save this remnant of the mighty race of man from the horror that will come upon it in the near future. Another thing I must do is to reaffirm the original patterns of heredity in these humans, to make beautiful again what is not beautiful among men. The ideas of beauty I have been taught and uphold are not the ideals I see you working out here. There is a point of conflict there. But I think you do not understand what is going to happen on this earth or you would not even be here! I would save you from your ignorance of the nature of life when de-force becomes predominant in such strength that it makes the thought of all life turn to destruction."

Ashtoroth was no longer smiling. Her face was set in lines, the lines a woman's face takes on when she is insulted. Her strong, beautiful rounded chin jutted in determined, stubborn anger.

"You think to turn me from this earth with falsehoods, to have it for yourself! Well, you shall not succeed. I took possession of this planet when it passed into the borders of my etherean kingdom, my rightful holding, inherited from my ancestors. You think to frighten me away with a child's tale of de. I know de is a deadly emanation, I know it causes age—"

Apollo turned his face, now grim, closer to her own angry one.

"Yet you have landed yourself and your armies under a sun that is in de, has been so for a thousand years—increasingly so. Why do you think the Elder ones abandoned this planet? Why do you think it has been allowed to drift the full circuit of the greater orbit without supervision? Do you want age to come upon you? Even now I see the effects of the terrible de of this sun upon you, and if you were not of reputation wise and of some value, I would not have ventured out from under my force-shields into the sun de to talk with you. I come to save you from a thing of which you seem in ignorance—and you call me a liar! Must I abandon you to a terrible fate? Within months from now, if you do not listen to me, you will be mad as a ravening garkil, slaying all before you, and you will be slain—perhaps by me—surely by anyone of power whom you attack in your madness. Your objections to my helpful counsel are themselves born of this approaching madness which will come to all upon this earth whom I fail to bring under the protection of my anti-de fields of force—and you are angry with me. Why?"

"I cannot believe what you say. I think you are motivated by a desire for this rich planet, to add it to your holdings as it passes through your own possessions in etherea—and that you seek to befool me who took possession first."

"Believe me, Ashtoroth, I did not know you were on this planet till I received your letter about little Suima."

"Enough!" Ashtoroth rose, her figure towering above the seated Apollo. "Go from me. Go, while I have restraint left not to slay you. I can listen to your lies no longer." Her face was flushed a dull red, her lips compressed, her breasts heaving, her dark eyes flashing black fire. "Little Suima I will keep with me. At least she will learn to tell the truth."

GUR HALF rose from his much too large seat at the foot of

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the board. Apollo too rose, for he loved the child.

"Do not keep Suima, O Ashtoroth," pleaded the gigantic God, humbling himself before her whom he saw was already under the sway of the subtle destructive rays from aging suns which insert a false will in the personality (resulting from a concentration of disintegrant electric within the body). Apollo saw that already Ashtoroth was suffering from this de-mentia, and that there was no reasoning with her. Wonderful as she may have been once, in her wisdom and her beauty, Apollo saw before her only a swift degradation into madness and death. To save Suima from accompanying her on this trail was his only thought. But it was not to be so.

"Go! The child remains with me. At least I will not lie to her. Go now!"

Ashtoroth's hand pointed to the door of the pavilion. She stood, a picture of outraged Godhood, but to Apollo and those few who understood, a pitiful picture of madness. Apollo, reading the angry thought leaping about her mind, knew there was no way to bring her to her senses at this time. Rising, he signed to his officers and the group left the pavilion in silence, their tall, stalking figures topping all of Ashtoroth's followers by a head, their faces grim and foreboding. For they all knew that only a miracle could save them now from the necessity of war to the death with this mad ruler.

Bitterly Apollo pondered what he might have said to placate her, but he knew better than to plague his wits with such worries, for none knew better than he that no group of words can stay the mental drive to destruction imparted by the terrible sun de when it has accumulated a charge within the body. It was inevitable, this clash, because of forces within her mind more powerful than reason, forces of which she was ignorant. Carefully Apollo cursed the teachers who had given Ashtoroth her early training in the far-off land of her birth. For they had left out the most important knowledge of all, the thing with which every Titan baby or Godlet begins his alphabet—A B C D, a baby see de—and which permeates all their thought in school from that time, so that never will their mind fall under the disillusions caused by too great de flows. But all this did not help in the present emergency.

Sadly the gigantic men returned to their fleet where it lay as if afloat upon a sea of grass, washed by the waves of green in the gentle wind.

But, unnoticed by their gaze, Gur had remained seated at the lengthy banquet table staring at Ashtoroth standing like a frozen statue of anger, and at Suima, crouched near her, and wondering vaguely why he stayed when his leader left. So it was that Gur came to be a part of those who followed Ashtoroth.

As the distant fleet thundered briefly and was gone again into the skies, Gur stood up and nobody seeming to notice him. He stole to the side of Suima.

It was a bright smile with which she greeted him now, even better than the magic greeting which had warmed his soul upon his first approach. And again Gur took Suima into his arms and kissed her.

Ashtoroth lowered her arm and came out of the deep and angry pit of warring thoughts which had engulfed her. Beside her she saw the two little earth people, Gur with Suima in his arms, and softly her huge hands touched the young heads.

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"So you chose love before glory, young one?"

Gur looked at the great black eyes of this strange sorceress, this being who to him was vastly more mysterious and perhaps powerful than his own better known Lord Apollo. And as Gur looked into her eyes, a strange vortex of emotion whirled within his mind. He could not tear his gaze away, and a swift and strange transformation took place within him. He could not know that this seeming storm of strange overpowering impulses she aroused within him was but the work of her unseen ray workers, taught to change all who neared Ashtoroth into mental slaves of her will. He could not know that hypnotic impressions of terrifically augmented thought were being driven into his mind by invisible rays, making him love Ashtoroth, making his self will, his self thought, instead concern for her welfare wholly, making of her in truth his worshipped Goddess, and through no choice of his own. He did not know why he had remained, but in truth it was but a trick of these same hidden ray workers to get yet another of Apollo's intimates into their hands for the information to be had from his thought.

CHAPTER VI

False Gods: "War is justifiable, lest the earth become too full."
Apollo: "Will they turn away from the idols of Apollo, and set up on their own account? The Creator's Lords mold the inhabitants of earth as clay. To those who have attained to be Gods, there is spontaneous growth forever. Find thou the symmetry of the flesh, of music and spirit."

The Book Of Apollo

PHAEJA questioned Apollo as their great fleet thundered back to the North to make contact with Cimiad and acquaint her with the turn of events and take counsel on what action to take.

Cimiad was to their hungry eyes a fresh breath of spring magic. Freya herself was never more beautiful, and Apollo compared her honest, sane eyes with the sultry, passionate glances of Ashtoroth. And he pitied Ashtoroth, for he knew her ignorance of Evil was leading her to a pit.

"Cimiad, there is in the south lands a great encampment of a force nearly equal to our own, of space voyagers and warriors like ourselves, but under Ashtoroth. They have been on earth even longer than ourselves and consider it the property of Ashtoroth. Unprotected by the anti-de force shields, Ashtoroth is near to de-mented, may soon run amok in a terrible war upon us. There is no way to show her reason for every word seems to her an insult: you know how de madness is, and that all things seem enemies. We visited her camp in force to show our strength, and because we did not know what might lie there. If we had found her even a few days sooner we might have made some headway against her inverting mind, but now it is too late. How can we avoid this war?"

"There is but one way: abandon the planet and Ashtoroth and all the people of the earth."

"That you know I will never do, Cimiad!"

"Then crush her quickly, and go on with your labors for your people."

"It might be better to allow her to become even more demented, until rage and mad thought lead her to attack us. Then we could trap her with less loss."

"Meanwhile all your time and effort must be taken up with spying upon her and with constant vigilance against her and with the everlasting

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preparation for a war. I say attack and overcome her now, before she herself has realized the need for full preparation. She cannot have known of us for long."

"Little Suima was taken by her over a week ago. On our visit just now, Gur deserted us as we left, stayed with Suima."

"I have searched long for Suima. It is good to know she is alive."

"Both of them are in increasing danger. The madness will grow upon Ashtoroth, for she does not believe my warning of the danger of this sun to one from dark space."

"Two more reasons why we should attack at once."

"There is no knowing what she might do to them in time. But I think they are safe for a while."

THE COUNSEL of officers voted unanimously for attack. But Apollo ruled that as yet Ashtoroth had not given sufficient reason for attack. That she might yet learn of her own doom if she remained under the sun and return to her own space kingdom, to her own constructed places afloat in the darkness of the ether.

Phaeja then said:

"If your knowledge of her future course of madness brought on by her ignorant exposure to the rays of this sun is not sufficient to cause an attack out of sheer self-protection, why do you say that it will happen?"

"It will only happen if she does not leave."

"'Twould seem then to do her a favor to drive her from this earth and away from the cause of her madness."

"Phaeja, I do not say we will not attack. I only want not to undertake rashly what might prove too costly. What we saw of her strength is far from all. There are the armies of Osiris her father, not too far off in these space fields for her to summon, and as well the armies of Baal who is well known to be as close as a brother to her if not her lover. Moreover, she may have concealed much of her own strength during our visit. All we saw were her armies of humans, and some few Gigante officers of hers from space. Enough ships and space-built armaments to impress us, but not in truth anything to tell us what her real strength might be. The mighty growth of some of these outlaw rulers such as Ashtoroth is well known, for their best are not taken from them every ten years for the central powers' armies, as is our own. We do not know if we are strong enough for this job, in truth."

"We can learn, quickly enough."

"How, O wise Phaeja?" Apollo's voice was faintly mocking.

"I can go to her. I can go to her as one who has had an argument with my leader, Apollo. His stubborn mind is well enough known that she would believe it. And if yourself approves, this plan we should follow. I could learn everything about her by pretending to fall in love with her. If my judgment of the female is not incorrect, she is one vastly in need of a *suitable* consort."

"You know the skill of her ray-hands with the stim and hypnotic effects of ray. Could you keep yourself unenslaved did she set herself to enslave your mind to her usage?"

"I am not entirely ignorant, my Apollo."

"Phaeja, the danger is greater than you perceive. This Ashtoroth has not undergone the training and the mental conditioning which is our upbringing. Her father, the false Osiris was an evil sorcerer, always struggling with the greater powers

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for the opportunity to sate his own unbridled appetites. There are arts known to evil that are unknown to us, forbidden in our teaching—whether wisely or no we cannot say, not knowing. If Ashtoroth should really become enamored of you—and I see no reason why she should not—there is no length to which she would not go, and there are inumerable arts unknown to us which she might practice upon you. You have seen what she has done to the humans under her power. They are less than beasts, her slaves, and she does not even see the evil of it all. Hers is a mind raised in an evil school, and she is unknowing and unlettered in the arts of logic. Your own mind, trained to deal with logical minds, would find itself at a loss to forecast her actions. There is no knowing what her inverted logic may decide upon."

"What you say is all true enough, if I were to be there for years. But for a week or two—long enough to learn her actual strength—then to seize my first opportunity and return. Your caution has you by the throat, Apollo. Is my life worth so much to you?"

"It is because I love Cimiad as much as yourself that I do not want my natural jealousy of you to sway my decision. I would choose another for this errand, Phaeja. If you should die, it would always be said that I sent you to your death. It might forever hold me back from advancement if such an event came to the ears of the Central Council. You know that. The worst injury you could do me would be to die, did I send you on such an errand."

"Nevertheless, Apollo, the job must be done and who is better fitted for it? By now she has read of our rivalry for the affection of Cimiad in the minds of Gur and of Suima. She will believe my story the more readily. And who else is so well schooled among us for the job? Who else could make her ray-hands read within my mind a lie as if it were the truth? My very difference with you now can be converted by myself into convincing thought fragments to uphold my story of desertion from your banner."

"You are persuasive, Phaeja, if you can learn to hate me, then she would believe you."

PHAEJA looked upon his leader for a long instant—the terrific mental conflict within him plain upon his face. Suddenly he strode one great step forward and his mighty fist struck a pile driver blow full into the beautiful face of Apollo. The perfect nose crushed, the blood spurted, Apollo's gigantic form, a head taller than Phaeja, staggered backward and fell to the ground.

The officers standing about, at first appalled, now leaped to seize Phaeja, but too suddenly in his hands the flame-sword glittered and snapped an arc of terrible power about him. Running, suddenly he leaped through the ring of armed men, sped across the field toward his own swift ship where it lay on the great field of Cimiad's building. Bolt after bolt from the side-arm rays of the officers followed his flying feet, but whether they were shooting to kill or just to speed his parting Phaeja could not know. He did know that many of these soldiers loved him, would purposely miss, while their zealous seeming efforts kept others from joining the pursuit.

He gained the long, slender needle that was his ship, the Wolfang, and his supple, gigantic form poured itself through the door lock like a leaping salmon. The jets roared a

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fiery defiance as Phaeja, now a rebel, took to the stratosphere.

Shaking his head, the tall figure of Apollo raised painfully from the ground. Ruefully he touched his face, looked at the blood on his hand. A sorrowful smile came to his bloody lips.

"That one kicks with his fist like the recoil of a master-ray. Let us hope he returns soon. We will make no report."

Few around the pair had heard the interchange preceding Phaeja's attack upon the person of his leader. And those who had, kept their counsel, for even so they could not know whether or no Phaeja had not deserted when he had made an opportunity by his leading words.

"It was wrong to fire upon him. It was a personal matter entirely, our quarrel. Hereafter fire upon no man before he is adjudged guilty of some crime by proper tribunal procedure."

Apollo went to his own quarters aboard ship, and there Cimiad found him, deep in thought. As she dressed his wound and with subtle surgery straightened his flattened nose, she said:

"I feel guilty of this affair. I should have declared my choice long since."

"And what is your choice, O most beautiful among the highest forms of creation—which shall it be?"

Cimiad smiled a bit cruelly.

"There is no need to declare that now, space separates the two whom my heart holds dear."

"Strangely enough, Cimiad, that speech leads me to tell you our quarrel was not about you."

"It is about some woman, then. Since the only woman on the planet who could attract men of your caliber is Ashtoroth, it seems she must have put her spell upon each of you. And if either of you are the kind who could be attracted to that daughter of Evil, why then neither of you will be my choice!"

"Cimiad, your deductions are subtly close to the truth, but believe me, not as you think. Our quarrel concerned Ashtoroth, but we are far from being under any spell of hers. The woman is mad!"

Cimiad's soft cheeks were flushed a bright pink.

"I will learn the truth, my leader, and if it is as I think, I will have no more of you. It is not bad enough, what has happened, but to add a lie to your offense!"

Apollo's heart contracted. The ways of women, even to his wisdom, were still a mystery.

"You are the second female to call me a liar this day, and without cause. Our de-shields must be checked. Something is splitting our unity, and only de could lead us into such mental err. See that your best hands attend to that checking, Cimiad. That is an order!"

"I shall obey, but I assure you it is not Sol's logic that leads me to anger with you."

"The dis-illusion is exceedingly confusing, Cimiad. One's friends seem enemies, and the whole safe base of one's inner life turns topsy-turvey. Yourself will conduct this check. I do not like the look of things. Remember the day—a short moon ago, it was—when you swore I was the truest friend of your life. Now you name me liar!"

For a long time after she had completed her doctoring of his injury and gone, Apollo sat in thought. Was this planet worth the effort needed to save it, but for some few centuries more? The sun *would* continue its degradation. Its de rays would continue to degenerate the life upon it and only endless labor

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could save the primitive people upon the planet from the greatest evil, the most profound degeneration into beastliness. What was the Father's purpose in giving this thankless task to him? Doubt of the wisdom of the Central Council and of the All-Father came to Apollo, but he shook it off, and composed his great limbs for sleep that would not come. The heavy, tainted darkness pressed upon his eyes, pressed there hot and sultry like the stare of Ashtoroth's lustful black orbs, and whispering came her words from the deep memories she had impressed upon him subtly with her hidden ray work.

"I am a woman. I wanted to know the great Apollo and to see him for myself. I have always held the ancient laws stifling to all life and pleasure. Stifling, noxious laws... stifling...stifling..."

The black dark pressed down, stifling too, and his memory kept murmuring of the strange witchery of release from the trammeling restraints which ringed all science under the Central Council, of the strange witchery of release, which it seemed was for him only, found in those mad, dark eyes of Ashtoroth. And Apollo wondered *if* all wisdom *was* to be found in the ancient pronouncements of the Elder ones, and whether even in her madness Ashtoroth had not found a truth or two. He slept, and the fierce, wild witchcraft which Ashtoroth's hidden ray-hands had worked upon him unnoticed came to life within his mind in strange, weird, lustful dreams of the great white body of Ashtoroth, giving him pleasure beyond the knowledge of those who lived under the restraint of the pronouncements of laws that limited all tampering with life and man's synthetic energy production, and the strange powers that might be grafted into a body of biotechnics, of thecto-genetics and of surgical grafting of glands and the injection of nerve stimulating hormones which caused a greater growth of the sensory apparatus. And Apollo wondered, if, under a different training in his earlier days he would not see this thing with different eyes? Somehow, Phaeja was playing the nobler part in his dash to—save the witch Ashtoroth?—or to obtain information for Apollo? Vaguely Apollo wondered which was Phaeja's true motivation—or did he truly want his independence, to cut loose from the central powers' domination? As he fell asleep Apollo was conjecturing just what a man could do with such freedom from restriction. Certainly there could be vast pleasure and gratification of all a man's less worthy dreams in it. And he wondered about the word *worthy*. Was it *worthy* to refrain from so much experimentation of obvious value to future races if the right man was the moving spirit?

WITH ASHTOROTH, Gur and Suima were in for some new and upsetting experiences. Their first inkling that life was not the ordered beauty and dignity of the Apollo legions came when, during a conclave with her officers, Ashtoroth's orders to ready themselves for war with the interlopers under Apollo was disputed by several of her lesser generals. Gigantic men from kingdoms unknown to Gur, as indeed they might be unknown to Apollo himself, battle-scarred veterans had no wish to tangle in open conflict with any who had the Central Elders backing them.

Their attitude they expressed in words like this, caught by Gur only from the abstract thought, as the

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language was very different.

"A man can by cunning avoid a Juggernaut, but he cannot outcrush it. We cannot openly face the whole power of the Federation under the Council, and that is what you propose. Conceded we might vanquish this Apollo, after him would come avenging hordes from his own kingdom of Tah, and from the City of Donga, from far Suad, all of whom owe allegiance to Apollo. And if we defeated them, which I doubt, not long after would come the full power of the Central Council fleets, for they would not be able to avoid the stigma of defeat, it would put the issue squarely up to them. Such as we, who hold aloof from the restraints of the great Federation under the Council, can live only by avoiding open conflict or attack upon that power. So they ignore us as being no danger to them. But once oppose them, *especially* if some little way successful, *then* they *must* crush you utterly, or suffer a loss of prestige. It would be vastly more unlucky for us to *defeat* Apollo than to *flee from him* in defeat. For if we fled, that would mean for us war to the death with an avenging power some million times as strong as our own. Ashtoroth, what you propose has not been fully considered by you?"

"I am not proposing, I am ordering. Obey or die. I will not allow Apollo to drive me from my possessions *with his lies.*"

"In which case, my Ashtoroth, I must hereby withdraw from your service. I relish life more than you think."

"There will be no desertion." Ashtoroth's face was an angry, evil mask. "Just to make sure you will be made an example for others of similar craven mind!"

Ashtoroth, standing now before them, was a figure to inspire fear. In battle harness, gleaming ray armor of gold colored metal, her hair caught up in a gleaming net of gold links, her ray helmet in her arm's crook, a plumed and chased example of the armorers best art, her black eyes flashing in fury, her strong white teeth bared in a half-snarl, half-smile of grim humor that these who served her should think to command her, she cowed them all. They were men of some thirty feet height, on the average, great monsters in bulk beside the tiny Suima and Gur, who flanked Ashtoroth, for she amused herself with their novelty and innocence.

Black browed, armored now at Ashtoroth's order—their great swarthy faces marked with an age of rough living in the ranks of more than one buccaneer of the space lanes, they were yet not men enough, or cunning enough, to circumvent this Queen under whom they had taken service. They sat and took her upsetting of all precedent and of all justice, her making of the virtual slaves to her domination, and watched while their comrade was led by the gigantic guards from his seat at the table up to the dais, where the throne sat empty, for Ashtoroth had taken her place at the head of the council board. On each side of the throne stood two tall, veiled forms which had caused Gur's curiosity before. Now at Ashtoroth's gesture the veil was plucked from the left one of these veiled gigantic forms. It was not a statue as we conceive statues, but an example of the art of synthesizing flesh and fabric and metal into one gigantic counterpart of the human figure, a robot made in the form of a giant woman. She stood, beauty beyond beauty, the

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sum of all ideal forms welded into a symphony of weird, awe-inspiring magic. Ashtoroth's hand made another gesture and the statue came to life. The great eyes opened and looked down into the eyes of the doomed man before her. They were eyes in which the tender passion of the mother, the shy lure of untouched maidenhood, and the devouring passion of nymphomania were mingled inextricably into a glance of pure sorcery, grasping forth at the soul with a magnetic lure overpowering. The giant officer who had been too outspoken in his opposition to Ashtoroth stepped slowly forward toward this weird thing of terrible beauty, visibly resisting, his brow beaded with sweat, his face contorted in utmost reluctance. To Gur the drama playing out before him was mystifying. Why should the man fear a thing that promised so irresistibly all the ecstasies of beauty, love and joy, a thing that said with every utterly lovely line and now with outflowing electrifying force flows of synthetic meaning that life was something to hold fast, life was worth any degradation, any torment, only so it could be held onto till the arms of such being could be reached. She fanned to roaring flames the desire for life.

As he neared the gigantic robot of beauty, the officer's reluctance, his will to resist, lessened. His steps hastened, until at last he flung himself into the arms of the artificial woman-thing. Those great, soft lovely arms closed about him, crushed him with a mockery of tenderness to that mechanically heaving bosom.

The warriors stared, a kind of horror on their faces, though some few had a strange light of evil pleasure, of sadistic delight in their eyes. But one and all were held by the utter, stark abomination of the monstrous drama of death they knew was playing out, for Ashtoroth was not disposed to relent. Her face was eagerly alight with a fierce blood-desire, a lust for what was to come.

Now that that fearful woman-trap had closed its arms on its victim, the deadly bait, the lure of the promise of all delight, dropped from off it as the devil might shed a cloak of camouflage. The lovely face writhed suddenly into a mask of horrible destroying anger, the eyes shot fire. The at first too-tender breasts became glowing hot with pain fires, fires that began to lick in little flames of unbearably agonizing torment all over that fearful creation of Ashtoroth's worst devising. Clear across the pavilion, Gur could feel the pain from those licking little flames of electric energy, the same energy, he knew, which courses up one's arm when the hand is slashed with an enemy's knife. He knew that because it felt the same, even at this distance. The tall, hardened warrior in the robot's arms howled, writhed and pleaded brokenly for mercy, but the flames only increased in strength. Somewhere her hidden ray-workers were manipulating the terrible machine that was as at once lovely as a Goddess and as horrible as Hell's worst servant. Visibly the man's flesh melted away now under the terrific energy of the pain vibrants. In a short time only a moaning wreck hung in the arms of the statue, a moaning wreck of scorched flesh which trembled and at last died.

Ashtoroth's voice, an ugly triumph ringing in the mockingly soft, deep tones of it, said:

"Anyone who does not realize I am the ruler, your only ruler, may have the same fate! The day for soft

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treatment has passed—we are at war! You will obey orders or die. And if this death is not terrible enough to assure obedience, I can devise worse—and lengthier. And if you fear the suckling from the Council, if you fear the wrath of that far off empire of space, it might be wise to fear my present anger more."

GUR NOW saw what himself and Suima were suddenly become, the slaves of a madwoman who thought no more of human life than she did of an insect's. He realized that her mastery of the situation was regal, and perhaps even necessary to prevent defection from her ranks, but still Gur saw that her reasoning was sunk in some savage error, for he knew that this woman could avoid conflict with Apollo did she wish to. Something was driving her to destruction, for even Gur could tell that these warriors were no match for the Gigantes from Tah under Apollo. Anyone with half an eye could see they had no real chance with such as Apollo—or so Gur figured. He did not feel so sure a half hour after the Conclave and its end in torture and death, for down from the sky spiralled the long needle ship with Phaeja's winged serpent upon its prow, landed on the long strip of burnt earth, and from it stepped out—Phaeja!

Gur looked at Ashtoroth, as a guard confirmed what his eyes had told him already, and saw a strange exultation at this unexpected development.

Phaeja coming here could mean but one thing, and her heart leaped at the possibility, for Phaeja was fully as rich and powerful a man in his own right as was Apollo, perhaps as powerful as herself in his inherited holdings. Coming alone—alone!

Ashtoroth called her slave girls, sharply clapping her hands. Swiftly she set them to work making her beautiful, feverishly she helped them strip off her armor, put on her skin scented oils, dress her hair, sprinkle the deep midnight tresses with gold-dust, deck her with jewels. It was a quick but thorough toilette by a dozen hastening maidens for her lush, avid body. The thin waist, wasp-like between her wide hips and outthrusting breasts, a waist such as only those who live on Icor injections, on fluid foods, on a hundred nutrient-bearing vibrants, can acquire. That thin waist they cinctured even smaller with a girdle of glintering mesh, jeweled with hyacine and sapphires, and over it all a fine scarf, revealing rather than concealing that form that would be remembered for an age on earth as the utmost in temptation, hetero-chromatic scarf, woven of spider silk that glittered in the light like the breath of a rainbow. On her feet they laced high-heeled sandals of golden leather—and she rose and swept out to meet him who might hold her fate in his hands.

PHAEJA stood waiting before her throne dais, pacing up and down, his face a study in conflicting emotions. A bolt from the guards who had sought to impede his flight had burned a crease across the shoulder muscles, and red blood had made a long zig-zag down his breast. He was unarmed, clad but lightly in the blue and scarlet of Apollo's legions. His jeweled weapon belt and cross straps were empty but for the flame-sword.

"Ashtoroth!" Phaeja exclaimed as she came toward him like a dream of too-great beauty, the floating scarf and glittering cincture almost her only clothing. Phaeja, seemingly involuntarily, extended both hands to-

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ward her, and seemingly without thought upon the meaning of the gesture, she took both of them in her own hands as if they were friends of old time instead of two who had but spoken three words to each other before.

"Phaeja, I can guess somewhat the reason you have come to me, but I must hear it from your lips. I noted your high, impetuous bearing when you came before with your leader, Apollo, and thought that here was one who would not tolerate the yoke for long. Tell me, is it true?"

"We quarreled—about y o u. I struck him, and left before worse came of it."

"Tell me exactly—about the quarrel. It is pleasant to a woman to hear of men fighting over her."

Phaeja looked at the smouldering, banked fires in the depths of her eyes, wondering just how far he could go in this deception—if it was a deception. Swiftly he hurdled the barrier of caution, speaking rapidly.

"O Queen, you must know that in certain things you misunderstood Apollo. It is true that madness can come from this sun if it is not guarded against. I insisted we must bring you certain apparatus to guard you and yours from the de infection from this sun. He said: 'Let her fall. It will save us the trouble fighting her.' I could not conceive of letting this neglect of your welfare proceed. It was criminal to hold a grudge against you for your treatment, which was perhaps justified. But no matter. I am here. I bring you much, if you will have me. If not, the space lanes are wide, and my own people of Norse, and my own throne in Um waits for me. But you can understand that there would be a certain satisfaction in thwarting Apollo —and there is also the matter of yourself and I, which is perhaps better left unmentioned between ourselves until we understand one another better. That I am here speaks much that words cannot say."

"I can understand that, Phaeja. Under other conditions it might be I who came to you, because I saw in your face understanding I found not otherwhere. Be seated, yellow-head, and my maidens will refresh you with wine and song."

ICE-CRYSTALS glittered like new snow in the wine, and the music those maidens made for him was also glittering with bright notes, and sensuous with soft rhythms. The eyes of Ashtoroth smouldered before him. Phaeja was strangely content beside this Queen, and enrapt in her free talk of things to which his ears had been forbidden all his life. There was much to learn of life for one raised by the Elder council's strict precepts, much strange and forbidden pleasure and exciting news of events that never reached ears guarded from discontenting truths. Or so it seemed as he listened, and Phaeja wondered again if he were deceiving Ashtoroth or himself, or mayhap Apollo, in this visit to this Queen of mystery and madness?

It was many hours later that Phaeja was shown to a sleeping couch, and if his steps wavered a bit, there were many a flagon of strong wine and mayhap a drug or two responsible. And in his inner eyes the soft flesh of Ashtoroth still gleamed, moving in a dance of terrific erotic meaning. The veil of Ashtoroth rippled in his very brain, a revealing magic half-concealing mysterious unguessed delights. And who can blame him if he drifted off to sleep vaguely wondering whether he was trapping Ashtoroth or she was trapping him? And

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the giggles of the guarding ray-girls, watching over his sleep and reading his thought, did not reassure him that he was not suspected. His mind was clever, they would not see the truth, but, by the thighs of Ashtoroth, neither could he discern where lay his will—with her or against her?

In the days that followed, Phaeja worked hard, constructing for Ashtoroth the de-shields he had convinced her were necessary, had led her to believe Apollo had purposely been abrupt in the telling of this need to her so that she would be led to believe him lying, so that the sun itself would do his work of conquering her.

And in the days that followed, as his avid superior mind drank in knowledge of Ashtoroth and her ways and works, he realized it could well be he was far too late to save Ashtoroth from the de madness. For even more rapid than his own work, driven as he was by necessity for protection of his own mind from the sun-infection, was the work of her warriors in readying their equipment for war.

The nights he spent in converse with that phenomenon of seductive fascination, Ashtoroth, who made men serve her with both fear and an awful unquenchable desire for her within their breasts marked Phaeja deeply. His mind staggered under the double load of convincing the ray-watch that he was not deceiving Ashtoroth, and of convincing himself that he was. And Apollo's words kept coming to his mind, so that he had always to put them away where they would not be seen by listeners. *"There are arts inumerable, unknown to us of the Orian states, which she will practice upon you. Hers is a mind raised in an evil school—unlettered in logic. You will find yourself at a loss in dealing with her. Her will may rule you wholly."* And again he would see his own impulsive blow crashing against Apollo's divine face and remorse would seize him so that he doubted his own wisdom for the first time in his willful, swift-thinking life.

Day followed day, and the brazen sun burned ever angrier. Some awful damned-up force was struggling for release from that chaining gravity.

Phaeja got his de shields into operation. The angry irritation of the de lessened in the vast encampment, and Ashtoroth became even more fascinating to him as they sat nightly talking of the vast diversity of their separate training. She exposed to him the infinite delights in the complex branches of life-science forbidden to Orian science, of the great pleasure palaces built by the outlaw Titans, Norse, Manas, and other races of space who had rebelled against the restrictions, of the women raised from childhood under certain growth-provoking vibrants and saturated in nutrients, with their minds bent wholly upon pleasure, of the Satyrs and their ways, of the infinite delights of the body to be obtained in such places. Not the least of their talk was of forbidden dream-makers, who are creatures raised from childhood under beneficial rays that enlarge and power the mind to make vast phantasmagoriae, intensely actual dreams, in such power and profuse sensual reality that men give up whole kingdoms to bask for a lifetime within the dream mech. Such evil growths of life, Phaeja had been taught, were unlawful, but he had heard whispers and now had come into contact with one who knew and had experienced the whole vast gamut of evil life in the forbidden reaches of space where the

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laws of the Orian Gods did not hold.

In spite of himself Phaeja was fascinated, for he realized that in their too great repression his own Elder rulers had deprived his life of much that would have enriched it.

Phaeja wondered too about the sending of himself and Apollo to this tainted Earth, for he well knew that when they returned they would be under suspicion of dementia from the degenerating sun, a suspicion which would probably defeat their aspirations for advancement, and somehow Phaeja knew that there was much to be said against the rule of the council of Orians.

Ever his soul wavered between this fearful female's attraction, which in his tremendous strength and youth was more powerful than mortal man can conceive, and ever his loyalty to Apollo and Cimiad swung him back to his decision to aid in destroying Ashtoroth.

THESE decisions were taken suddenly out of his hands, for Ashtoroth ordered the expedition against Apollo by air. Something of the conflict within Phaeja had been whispered to her by her handmaids at the telaug beams. They were not all fools to miss his hidden planning to escape. She saw that there was no opportunity for him to return to Apollo and exerted herself to the utmost to appear to be what would most cause affection in him for her. In this she was vastly successful, and her handmaids worked tirelessly to transform Phaeja into a willing tool.

It was a man torn between two terrific attractions, who took the air with Ashtoroth's war-fleet. The thousand lifting jets thundered about his *Wolfang*, and he pulled the levers to lift his own swift ship with them. Even as he did so, he visioned himself firing the Master-ray upon Cimiad's loved maidens and her own worshipped beauty becoming a cinder in the winds of heaven.

Ashtoroth, in her flagship ahead, had stolen a glance with a telaug penetray at Phaeja's mind in the confusion of the launching and laughed a throaty exulting laugh at his inner conflict, exulting because she knew that only by her death and complete defeat could Phaeja escape her. It was good to have power, to know that a great fish like Phaeja was helpless in her net.

His crew aboard the *Wolfang* were men old in her service, men as big as himself in growth and vastly more experienced in the tortuosities of Ashtoroth's thought. He realized that he was but the pilot, the man at the controls, and that his crew would rule him did he contemplate turning his coat again. And just what the whims of Ashtoroth's cruel fancy might do to him for that he did not know, but his imagination supplied him with an interesting series of examples from his talks with her, for she had included in the entertainment not only talk of the ways of outlaws, but examples of what might be done with wayward followers by rulers who were not squeamish. And though his thought during these experiences had been under iron control not to show aversion, still these examples had set a certain fear of her within him, as she had intended. As the blue Mediterranean fled beneath the speeding war-fleet, Phaeja realized he was trapped in a closing net of circumstance which even his own nimble mind and superb physical equipment were not going to elude.

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CHAPTER VII

Apollo: "Think not that only great thunders and terrible stratagems can govern the heavens and earth."

The Book Of Apollo

APOLLO and Cimiad, under strained relations since the defection of Phaeja, yet had to ready themselves and their forces for the very probable clash with Ashtoroth. To be on the safe side, Apollo sent to Gau, the place of the Central Council, for ships and men. But, since earth and her sister planets and the sun had traveled a long way from its first approach to Gau, he did not expect an answer from this ship for some months, and mayhap no forces for more months. He knew that battle would be joined before that with Ashtoroth. Apollo resolved to send a quieting message to Ashtoroth and apologize humbly to her in hope that she would cool her anger and her madness with thought of her own best interests. But he put this message off from day to day, and his scouting planes brought him no news of any movements of Ashtoroth's armies—and he sat quietly waiting for the return of Phaeja and his information.

Thus Apollo was at a loss for decision when his watching arrow-ships came in from the African borders telling him a great fleet had taken the air and was advancing toward him.

THE NIGHT before the fleet of Ashtoroth took the air against Apollo, Gur got wind of the thing from the unwonted preparations, and unlike Phaeja, who was watched because he was important, he saw that his opportunity to escape this place must be now or be at war with his own leader.

The little scout plane in which Suima had been captured still lay within the vast underground hangars where the great space warships were housed.

Usually it was shut off from egress by the vast bulk of these ships, but tonight the larger part of the fleet was fueled and wheeled out upon the field in readiness for the departure in the morning. Thus it was that Gur saw his chance was tonight, and his whisper to Suima went unobserved by the ray-watch in the great preparations.

When at last the vast camp had settled for the night, the two figures, diminutive indeed beside the great bodies of the pacing guards, went unnoticed as they strolled arm in arm like lovers through the African moonlight.

To get a ship was necessary, for Gur knew that the chances of life on a trip clear across Europe were feeble, nearly as feeble as their chances of long existing on the plains of Gomagat where the tremendous reptilian life made all other life fugitive and hidden.

How to get that tiny winged jet-plane out upon the great burned flight-field was his problem. The pacing guards were from two to three times as large as himself and by no means less in wits or watchfulness.

Gur had to cause a distraction to get the guards out of the way. The simplest way occurred to him: shuffling near the edge of the field his hunter's ears told him was a rhinodon. Gur's tools were only his bow. Though he now carried a ray tube at his side, the use of the bow was more natural to him.

Drifting around the edge of the vast field in the shadows, Gur silent-

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ly got himself downwind from the rhino, and placed a half-dozen of his slender shafts in the rump of the huge, thick-skinned beast. Two or three of his arrows made no impression, but persistence rewarded him, and at last he sank a point through the beast's armor. A bellow of rage rewarded him. The rhino, half blind, short-sighted, snorting with outraged dignity, saw but one thing that could have caused this pain, the flickering lights about a great space battle-ship where last-minute loading operations were still going on.

His great horn pointed at the target of the flickering lights, his nose telling him that there were no friends on the field, the rhino started a charge clear across the wide open space of burnt earth. Gur slipped quietly back to the hangar doors, and as the huge bulk of the maddened beast loomed suddenly out of the half-dark, cries and ray flashes told him the rhino was doing his duty by his outraged rump. Suima and himself slipped by the staring guard, watching the sudden commotion, and as the man slipped his sidearm from the holster and started on a run for the ship out in the field, Suima's little jet plane shot out of the hangar doors and was into the night sky in a flash of flame.

A search beam of transparent penetray shot into the sky after them, but Gur circled widely, shut off the jets, and was gone into the north in a long, undetectable glide. Out of sight of the camp, he gave the controls to Suima, sat back to figure how best the way to Cimiad's northern camp might be found.

Suima, no great shakes at navigation's finer points, followed the coast of the Mediterranean, a white ribbon of surf in the moonlight, to the Pillars of Hercules, crossed the strait and winged up the coast of Europe. There were few breaks in the great dark forests covering the inland. This was primeval wilderness. Northward and northward fled the little plane, and Gur dropped off asleep.

HE WOKE to a great crashing, a rending of limbs and fabric, and a thumb on the head that brought comets spinning through his head—and darkness again.

He awoke the second time with a vast throb of pain in his brain, and opened his eyes to see Suima's tear-stained face above him, and beyond her a sullen morning sun just over the tree tops. Not far off lay the wreckage of the little plane.

"I fell asleep, too, Gur!"

"Women drivers!" said Gur, holding his head, and looking around for comfort where there was none. "Where are we, anyway?"

"I don't know. We can't be more than a few hundred miles from Cimiad's camp."

"As bad as a thousand, that. Suima, it will take us weeks of travel on foot. We may never get there—and the fleet takes off this morning, and no one to warn Apollo. We held his life in our hands, and we fell asleep. Oh, why did I let you take the plane?"

Suima raised her nose heavenward.

"Because you were sleepy. It never occurred to you I was just as sleepy. Ashtoroth kept me by her side every night, and she sat up talking and making eyes at Phaeja every night for the past week till hours after midnight. I was dead for sleep."

"Suima, in the old days, before we knew the Gods really lived, did you ever think they were as they really are?"

"I have learned much, my Gur. I

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have learned I love you for being Gur, and not a God who has loved a thousand women and forgot them. I have learned that though we are mortal, still life is new and clean to us, while to them it is an old worn-out story with nothing new in it. They have seen it all better before, in some far place."

"Apollo claims *that* is a *dis-illusion* that the men from the dark spaces suffer from here on earth. That out in space where their vast home-spheres drift there is no such dis-illusion and that life is ever wonderful and new!"

"Well, just the same I am glad you have not lived a thousand years."

"I don't know, Suima. It must be fine to be so wise. Ashtoroth enjoys life, even the mess she makes of it."

"Ashtoroth is not a normal woman. She has made herself oversexed with her rays and with forbidden graftings of glands. She is not like other people. Life is exciting to her even on earth because all her appetites are out of balance. She is not a woman!"

"She seemed to wind those great space warriors around her finger well enough. And Phaeja, whom we thought so independent, catered to her every whim like a lackey."

"I think he was after information, and not truly enamored of her."

"So did she. You notice he didn't escape as we did."

"He is a little large for such work. Too, she might have had another reason for not letting him get away. I would not want to be Phaeja today."

"Phaeja can take care of himself."

"But today he will be forced to take the air against Apollo, and against Cimiad! Can you imagine his ship firing on Cimiad, and him unable to give orders against it?"

"That will be terrible!"

"And of us—we will not even see the battle. Apollo will be taken unaware, they will be all slain. They are so good and wise, his people. Even if, after seeing the ways of Ashtoroth's people, they seem a bit...."

"I know what you mean! A bit wound in red tape."

"You mean priestly rigamaroles. Yes, there is such a failing in them. But I think Apollo will not be taken unaware. I have sensed a watch upon the camp of Ashtoroth, it came from very far away."

AS THEY talked, Gur built a fire, and warming his arrows one by one over the heat, straightened them across his thumb, eyeing the shafts with care. Without rising, he suddenly whipped up his bow and set a shaft after a small leaping animal that was not a rabbit, but more like a deer, the size of a large rabbit.

As they munched and talked over the fire, peace came upon them here on the sea-beach, after all the strain of fear that had been upon them, fear of the strange, mysterious pressures upon the life under Ashtoroth, and of her uncertain temper—and of the things she sometimes did to men and women for mere amusement. Fear of becoming a monster's head and shoulders, a centaur manufactured by her grafting surgeons, who sometimes made such things, fear of a hundred peculiar fates and over-excitations that made of her people slaves to her science. Fear of becoming one of the things that pleasured her idle moments with odd appetites she forced into their minds to become their ruling impulse, fears for which their simple life among mortals had not prepared them.

A great roaring sound suddenly swept upon them from the sky, and

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the light dimmed as across the rising sun thundered sky ships by the thousand, darkening the whole south sky. Abruptly Gur scuttled into the brush above the sandy beach and after him raced Suima. Neither had any desire to be picked up by Ashtoroth.

Even as they turned to watch the mighty war-fleet pass overhead, an echoing roar came from the north and spinning about, Gur saw, swooping from higher in the stratosphere, an even greater fleet of needle sharp otevans, diving down, down, upon the slower moving airavagnas of Ashtoroth.

Even to his ignorance it was plain to Gur that somehow Apollo had the drop on Ashtoroth and was pushing home a mighty charge with full power of atomic jets and the gravity of earth combined.

That vast spear of power, a great acute V of diving death-ray bearing ships, blazed, screamed down and down! Gur held his breath in an agony of suspense, and Suima screamed again and again, holding her ears with her hands against the terrible roar of jet exhausts that filled the whole sky with tearing sound. But her eyes were riveted upward on the point of that diving V of death for Ashtoroth.

At the last moment, the widespread armada of lower planning airavagnas split right and left smoothly. The down screaming V shot through the sudden opening, and as the long V streamed past, rays shot up and down upon them from the larger heavier ships of Ashtoroth.

From that flashing instant of ray-contact, came spinning down a dozen great riddled, flaming hulks, down upon the forest and into the seas about Gur and Suima.

Going too fast to turn upon the evading ships, Apollo's V of ships flashed on down slower and slower, bow jets flaming vast thunder and lightning power before them, sped in a long curve down and then up, up, the speed of their flight only slightly diminished, and now came around in a full turn, spinning over as Gur visualized the giant warriors inside manipulating the gyro levers to spin the ships into firing position again upon their flight axis.

Once again above the vaster, slower fleet of heavy-bodied, older ships of Ashtoroth, the long curve tightened, flashed again into blinding speed of power dive, and their rays lashed out ahead in that instant of ray-range contact—even as the fleet split again to right and left before them. This time a dozen of the great, heavy airavagnas dropped, spewing forth suddenly a thousand leaping warriors from the flames of hell that filled the ignited metal bellies of the ships. Now it was raining swarthy warriors from the riddled hulks above. The sky was dotted with them, diving in gravity falls, turning on their anti-grav packs a few hundred feet from the earth, drifting to the sand of the beach, lighting in the trees, perching there like giant birds to watch the battle above.

Gur and Suima crouched lower in the brush, not to be observed by these armed soldiers, most of whom were of Ashtoroth's forces, for most of the ships speared by the flaming rays above had been Ashtoroth's slower little flurries of ray fire from their ships. Here and there these fought in side-arms as they killed off the occasional drifting warrior from a dead ship of Apollo's. It was no place for an Apollo warrior to come down.

But in the sky above the armada of Ashtoroth was cut in two, and swirling now in savage individual resistance against the swarms of smaller,

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fewer-manned ships of Apollo, which worried the great ships as killer whales worry and gnaw a great sperm whale until they feed upon him in death. So it went above, many and many of the fast needle ships they picked off from the greater ray ships of Ashtoroth, but always there were more, and one clean-driven dive unintercepted counted for a whole shipload of a thousand warriors, while the needle ships of Apollo were manned but by a score of men, were but a fraction of the loss.

This vast whirling sky of death above was rent every while with the earth shaking sound of atomic fuel exploding as some burning ship struck the earth, and the vast pillars of smoke and heaving flame and dust billowed now like terrifying mushrooms growing suddenly from the fertilizing, titanic death of the world herself.

ALL THE air was now dark with the billowing smoke clouds, rent by fiery fingers of death searching right and left above, and down through that fire-lit smoke clouds plummeted ever another great blazing hulk.

To Gur it seemed the end of all Ashtoroth's vaulting, oftspoken ambitions for rule and license and power over men, for all her ideas of a world ordered after her own mad ideas of *how life should be*—a phantasmagorical mixture of all life forms coupled in every mad combination, all brought up to but one idea—pleasure—and powered physically by her own undeniable knowledge of life science with the strength for a lifetime of indulgence, an endless lifetime, for Ashtoroth planned not on death, but figured there was an answer to age as well as to all other problems, for in her ignorance she thought all problems could be overcome by setting a slavish technician to work upon it. This was the reason she could not accept Apollo's warning that age and madness both came from this sun, for her pretending wise-men had told her otherwise, not knowing why this sun and this phalanx of planets was different from those where life did not die, but kept on growing till size and conflict over food caused death.

This dream of hers of a world organized into her own ideas of how a world should be was what had set her against Apollo's overtures and warnings, for he had not compromised on whose world it was. It had been assigned him by the All-father, and that had seemed to him to settle the matter.

Maddened by the death and destruction visited so suddenly upon her seemingly unconquerable array of power by the swifter, smaller ships of Apollo which had seemed to her from her spies' reports to be much less formidable, Ashtoroth stared out of the fore-view rays of the bridge of her ship, the *Viperfang,* stared and silently behind her stood her general, and behind him the Admiral of the war-fleet, and in their eyes was the knowledge of death coming swift upon them for their slower speed, unknown to them before they adventured the attack, made it impossible and disastrous to flee or to stay.

So it was that when the telesolidograph showed her the horned, golden head of Apollo, she leaned forward and tried not to show her awful venom for him. Even she bared her great, even teeth in a half smile as he spoke.

"If you will concede defeat, we can call off this slaughter? I like it no

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more than yourself. I will be generous, Ashtoroth."

She turned her still proud head, the plumes nodding, to left to the face of Bel-Marduk, her general, and to the right to the face of Hammar, her admiral, and in each face she read: "This offer must be accepted or else death."

Anger and frustration mingling on her face, her tall helmet plumes flung incongruous glory above her face as she nodded her head to the stern face of Apollo in the telesolidograph cube.

Like great cows shepherded by dogs, the great war-fleet of Ashtoroth was directed to the landing field of Cimiad's female legions. As the last of the huge dreadnoughts of the space seas came to rest, down from the outer atmosphere screamed the flashing needles of glory, the legion of the women of Cimiad, where they had waited for need to arise to descend upon the enemy in a crushing blow—a need that had not arisen.

As this unused strength of Apollo's came into view, flashing fighter after fighter circling down, air screaming about them and nose jets thundering just above the field as they stalled into landing speed and settled evenly on their anti-gravs, perfect piloting brilliantly executed, Ashtoroth realized how greatly she was outclassed by these warriors of the Ruler of Tah, sent to earth by the Central Council, how utterly she had been wrong in attacking!

Ashtoroth was unable to face the officers about her whom she had over-ruled in ordering the attack. She hung her head in a vast shame, her face scarlet, and Phaeja, watching her over his own vision ray, thought he had never seen her lovelier than with this honest embarrassment upon her.

Phaeja himself had not been obliged to do much but pilot his own *Wolfang* and dodge the diving, ray flaming ships of his former comrades. His crew had fired steadily upon them, but strangely their pilot had given them little opportunity for effective shooting.

Ranged before their ships upon the burnt, hard crocked ground of the landing field, the men of Ashtoroth waited, for they knew not what?

UP TO HER group, Ashtoroth's swarthy officers and men, fronted by her own sultry-eyed, proud-armored figure, up to this would-be Goddess strode Apollo, topping them all by head and shoulders, and Ashtoroth's heart fluttered at the sight of the blond tower of strength, so different in his horned, golden beauty from her own race of dark-haired people, olive-skinned, almond-eyed , so contrasting was his physical beauty to her own sensual appeal. A full realization of her own unworthy, vaulting pride and uncalculated aggression came to her from the watching rays of Cimiad's women, so that she hung her head in shame and the watching rays augmented that sensation of shame in her till it flooded all her body with a wilting debasement before Apollo.

Apollo spoke: "O my vanquished enemies! I sprang from this red star, the earth, long, long ago. Time has made this earth unfit for proper growth. I am here to see if something may be done to preserve the ancient source of the roots of my people. You, in your ignorance, assumed I was here to add yet another world to those which own me ruler. That is not true, and it is unfortunate that your reason was blinded to the truth, and that men died from a misunderstanding. In order that your ignorance may be alleviated, and that you

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may not fall into errors of thinking, and in order to save your immortal lives, that you may realize that a world under de-generating rays from an aging sun is not fit for immortal habitation, I sentence you to one hundred years in the schools of my Capital City on Tah, there to attain to the knowledge of the reasons for immortality, and to learn the patterns of life as they are decreed from ancient time, so that you will not tamper with these patterns again. You, Ashtoroth, although you have been in vast error due to disintegrant infections, have been called *evil*. I see much promise in you, much that must be cared for by the best scientists to save your mind for the future of the Elder race. Therefore you are to take up your habitation in my own palace on Donga, to be cared for by my own teachers, and will be free to go when those teachers approve your logic as it forms in your mind."

As Apollo said these words, a deep red flush suffused Cimiad's face where she stood just behind Apollo before Ashtoroth, for this was an honor Ashtoroth's actions had not merited, and Cimiad saw in this action a desire in Apollo to have this luscious wanton by his side.

Cimiad's flushed, angry and embarrassed face and flashing eyes turned to Phaeja where he stood behind Ashtoroth, having come up from his own ship, leaving his men to attend this surrender conference and to hear what his own fate at Apollo's hands might be.

Phaeja returned Cimiad's look with a stare that told her nothing, and truth to tell Phaeja was stricken with jealousy at these words of Apollo, for Ashtoroth's maidens at their ray-work upon his mind had implanted there a strong attachment for Ashtoroth. He realized that this sending of Ashtoroth to his own capital was in the nature of holding a hostage to put a barrier to any counter-action by Ashtoroth's relatives in Hored, and in truth he saw good reason in it.

To take the weapons of these piratical men of Ashtoroth's, men she had acquired from the mercenary pleasure palaces and corrupt and outlaw worlds of space, men hardened to every form of evil and who had fought through the bloodiest battles of space history in the last century, to take these hardened adventurers, strip them of weapons and glory and opportunity to get into mischief, to send them back to school like children was acutest irony, and it would be punishment enough for them to find themselves placed with smooth-cheeked youngsters before the doddering Elders of Apollo's schools. Phaeja could not help smiling as he thought of it. Phaeja knew they would not escape, for the watch rays would see to that. But to place Ashtoroth in his very home, where every day he would have to explore that sensual, avid mind with his own in unavoidable contact, somehow Apollo was far too willing to be tempted. Phaeja wondered if there was not a subtle baiting of Cimiad in it. Cimiad's face told him this was true and his confused heart leaped, for Apollo had given him an opening here to turn Cimiad's heart more firmly toward himself.

As he pondered this, standing stiffly at attention, Phaeja realized that Apollo's heart might be as confused as his own by the conflict between Cimiad's non-committal affection and Ashtoroth's unlawful tampering with their emotions by use of the stim rays which can subtly upset all the ties and affections and substitute new and irresistible objects of erotic attachment.

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THE EMBARRASSMENT faded from Ashtoroth's face as she pondered Apollo's words and the meaning that might be inferred from them. She looked at the smaller, slighter, less full-blown beauty of Cimiad. Dark and lovely as she was, still her attraction was that of the purest, new opened lily, while that of Ashtoroth was like the red-and-black-spotted, flesh-odored passion-flower.

CHAPTER VIII

Apollo: "How shall I comprehend thy designs, O My Creator? Thou drivest me back to the time Thy angels came and stood man upright, saying: Be thou a man, and, be thou a woman! But they would not."

The Book Of Apollo

SO IT WAS that the great war-fleet took off into space, driven by prize crews of Apollo's warriors, and loaded down with the prisoners, prisoners who took very ill the laughter of the seasoned warriors of the crew that they should be sent back to school like truant children whose ignorance had led them into error.

And on the ship, *Viperfang*, Ashtoroth and her crew languished behind locks on the long voyage, and with them was Phaeja, and Phaeja was very angry that he too should be sent away like a war prisoner, for he had expected that Apollo would recognize that he had struck him only to have a clean break with him in his mind to present to the suspicious telaug rays of Ashtoroth so that his spy work should go unnoticed. But Apollo had not seen fit to recognize that, and had perhaps seen here an opportunity to rid himself of a restive follower while at the same time keeping the strength of men who owed Phaeja allegiance with his armies.

In truth Apollo had not known what to do, and had ignored Phaeja, allowed him to be placed with the other prisoners as though he were no longer fit to speak with openly before others.

But not the last ship of the former fleet of Ashtoroth had left the ground when Apollo sent a swift ship into space after the *Viperfang* to bring Phaeja back. Apollo had allowed him to go because he had read of the conflict in his mind, his strained allegiance to all the accepted laws and patterns of behavior planted there by Ashtoroth's influence and errant reason, and had allowed this oversight to take place in order subtly to frighten him, to plant there in his mind a full realization of the dangers of opposing the Elder precedents and laws, to give him a chance to think of his life as an outlaw did he so contemplate.

As Phaeja stepped out from his locked cabin saw there waiting him in the *Viperfang's* corridor the old friend and adviser of Apollo, *Bos*, a surgeon. It was a glad feeling to know that Apollo had sent for him.

Swift again to earth, and there Phaeja was embraced by Cimiad and by Apollo, and welcomed as a loyal friend who had been away, and all their hearts were light again where they had been dark.

Still were the ships out picking up those who had fallen and leaped from the wrecked ships of the battle, and on the coast of England, where the greatest part of these had fallen, Gur and Suima were found among the prisoners and were brought to Apollo shortly after Phaeja's return.

Now, that madness that Apollo had known was coming, descended upon the earth. In the morning the sun rose, a ball of terrific size, increased by more than twice by some sudden layer of fuel the fire had struck into upon its interior surface, and the de

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rays came down upon the earth in terrible strength.

Nearly the whole northern hemisphere had been covered with Apollo's anti-de gen towers, creating a force-field which kept out the worst rays, and wherever the underground generators functioned, there life remained peaceful, sweltering in the heat, but still sane and unmaddened life.

But at the equator and in the whole southern hemisphere, all life became maddened with destructive will, and vast herds of animals raced across the plains, poured through the passes of the mountains, and what cities were there were crushed beneath the thundering maddened herd of giant reptiles, of mammoths, of deer and horse and other animals, all fighting and running onward from they knew not what.

In the southern hemisphere, man-life was nearly entirely destroyed, while the animal life was decreased by two thirds.

The equatorial belt itself was now too hot for any life, and there fleets passed over, and in the northern parts of Asia and Africa and South America they set up the beginnings of the building of the gigantic network of field generators that would cover the planet with a protective force-field when they were finished.

Day followed day full of hard labor and of slaughter of the hordes of maddened animals that drove ever southward, and attacked anything that moved before them.

Cimiad was vastly relieved that Ashtoroth was gone from her life, and that she had her two great Titans paying her court, but her heart was confused, her mind too busy, to realize that she *must* choose between them.

So it was that ever in their two minds hovered the images and emotions planted there by Ashtoroth, of infinite pleasure and the pursuit of pleasure, of her own curling luxurious lips and sensuous, swaying hips, and in their sleep it was the breasts of Ashtoroth they saw and not the sweet smiling lips of Cimiad.

AT THIS point in the labors of Apollo, a message came from the Central Council, saying:

"Earth has now passed beyond the regions of influence of Tah, and therefore is under the rule of Thor, God of Palla. I have sent therefore a message to Thor, saying: My son, behold the red star, she courseth from Mos to Dae, and now draggeth in the swamps of Asath. Behold, thou shalt deliver her..."

So it was, that though their labor on earth was far from completed, the fleets of Apollo, and of Cimiad, and of Phaeja, rose from earth and left. The red star faded behind them, and the great force-fields they had built pulsed on, for they were atomic-powered and would so function for some centuries without any repair. And the people of earth remembered Apollo, and the Apollo legions. The ideal of bodily beauty he planted in their minds still functions to this day, causing maidens to choose well-formed lovers, and men to choose well-formed maidens, and the race of man progresses in beauty and in love of music and symmetry of every kind. For such was the pattern laid down by Apollo.

But even Apollo could not take the aging of the sun from man, and man remains mortal to this day.

IT WAS A happy party aboard the Airavagna of Apollo, with Cimiad laughing often, and Phaeja's mind now somewhat free of the dark lure

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placed there by Ashtoroth, and Bos and their other long-time comrades all happy in their release from labor by the council and by the onward journey of earth from out Apollo's jurisdiction.

Many and diverse were the relaxations they planned upon their return to the City of Ptimus on Tah, where lay Apollo's palace. And only in Cimiad's mind was the knowledge of Ashtoroth's presence there a shadow of menace. For the others, her stinger was drawn, but for Cimiad her beauty remained a threat as great as ever.

This future threat Cimiad resolved to neutralize by setting certain subtle tests before Apollo and Phaeja, and choosing between them the one that best passed those tests.

As the long voyage continued, the expanding dynamos throbbed ever through the ships of the fleet and they rose from density to etherean density, and as they neared Tah, were of the same specific gravity as the city of Ptimus, that floats above the vast sphere of Tah.

CHAPTER IX

Apollo said: "To condense and to expand, to expand and to condense, is this all? Who shall fashion a corporeal world by compressing ether?

Also Apollo said: "From Mi, my virgin mother, the earth who conceived me, I rise me up and go, forever!"

The Book Of Apollo

ASHTOROTH'S captive fleet landed, after some two hundred days, in the vast ethereal city of Ptimus.

Ptimus was a vast artificially constructed world floating just outside the etherean sphere of Tah. The glorious beauty and tremendous size of the lovely etherean city overawed Ashtoroth at first. Her graceful knees smote together that she had been rash enough to oppose the mighty ruler of such a vast place of such intricate, infinite labor of construction.

Ashtoroth herself was treated like an honored guest in the palace of Apollo and Ashtoroth was given the freedom of the whole palace. She knew with great surety that this was only done by order of Apollo, conveyed with her by the officers of the prize crews of the fleet, and she smiled to think him such a booby as to have an affection for her, for she knew this affection had arisen only from the work of her ray maidens upon his mind.

Her captive warriors, slave maidens and other members of her party were all treated very like wayward children and sent to the great military barracks of the schools of the city. They were forced to attend classes daily, with the beardless youths of Ptimus, and great was the humiliation of the swarthy, battle-scarred veterans of a dozen wars that they should be treated like children.

Nearly a year elapsed, and still Apollo and his swift ships came not from the far-speeding earth, and space like a great ocean now lay between Ptimus and the earth, ever increasing. And as the distance between earth and the etherean realm of Tah grew ever greater, so did the plans and subtle wiggling stratagems grow within the plotting mind of Ashtoroth as her body desired over its wonted indulgence and was denied.

Ashtoroth also had been ordered to attend classes. These were held daily in the cyclopean spaciousness of Apollo's demesne, by the wisest of the teachers of the city. Only the friends and relatives of Apollo and their children might attend these classes, and the dark, sensuous beauty of Ashtoroth among these blond, horned people was as a red rose full blown among half-opened lilies.

Ashtoroth's already great and diversified learning entranced the

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teachers' innocent minds, and fascinated their repressed sexual natures with its broad and free interpretation and talk of those fields of wisdom forbidden to their minds by ancient law. They held long ecstatic conversations and libidinously thrilling discussions with this subtle sorceress, and her lovely face stilled their will against her. While she was seemingly being questioned on the nature of the teachings she had acquired elsewhere, she learned more than they of their own store of secret things.

Having access to the great laboratories, which were nearly empty for a great part of the time when the teachers, busy, self-important and blind to the evil in Ashtoroth were at work elsewhere in the great capital, Ashtoroth conceived a daring plan whereby all this mighty world might fall like a ripe plum into her avid lap.

Accordingly, with blandishing smiles wreathing her lips with the sorcery she knew best of all enchantments, Ashtoroth requested and obtained permission to work in the laboratories, and also obtained certain of her men from the schools of the city to "do the heavy lifting" for her studies which included the use of many great carboys of chemicals and nutrients and acids.

The simple, sheltered minds of the teachers saw no wrong in the request, for did not her mind lay open before their rays, could they not read that she had reformed once and for all?

And in the laboratories, deserted now, Ashtoroth smiled her dark, secret, lusting smile, and prepared to commit the greatest crime of her centuries-old career of subtle and intricate crimes against all life not her own.

ONE OF Ashtoroth's greatest arts was the construction of *androids*, beings such as the one who had embraced and consumed the body of her dissident general in Africa, beings that look like life, are alive in every way in truth, but are constructed of metal and fabric and wire and covered with synthetic flesh, and also contained most of the organs of life supported by synthetic media.

Ashtoroth planned carefully to build the most useful and valuable android ever built by any being. Useful to Ashtoroth's plans, that is.

Accordingly the vats were filled with nutrient fluids, and the converter vats were filled with the living flesh of animals, the flesh dissolved. All the cells separated from their various symbiotic labors and took up their life as individual entities subsisting upon the nutrient in the fluids, awaiting their new symbiotic assignments.

Ashtoroth thus had several great vats filled with the free protoplasm of life which is the base from which sprang all specialized cells.

Now in the synthesizer and integrator matrix circuits about certain great low vats, she placed those electrical intricacies which were the patterns which she had obtained from the stores of records in the lofty libraries, records of the thought and physical electrical patterns of Apollo himself, records which contained the whole of his physical nature and character patterns.

Into the vats of jelly she dropped very carefully measured amounts of amino acids: *trypto-phane, aspartic acid* to stimulate the sudden specialized growth she wanted, *di-methionine* and *glutamic acid*. Some thirty-five separate amino acids she measured and added to the jelly, and activated the records of the matrix of force lines around which these cells

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would cluster in obedient organization. Precisely calculated, intricate and dangerous labor, for discovery meant to her the loss of the last shreds of her freedom, she knew well.

As the cells grew into specialized cells, and organized and integrated in the vats into organs of life, she transplanted with vast care these embryonic organs into their place in the matrix of life electric (ulegra) which was laying down the force lines around which other plasma was forming into bones and muscle fibres.

Day by day passed over her fierce absorption in her task. Steadily she labored, keeping off sleep by fortifying herself with strengthening beneficial rays. And ever her demanding body called for the pleasures of stim denied her, and for all the vast diversity of vice and gratification so suddenly taken from her life.

At last came the day when a figure lay complete in the low life vats, mind and organ and muscle and bone built over the slight mechanical framework with which she had begun, and each organ and muscle, each outer form and inner mental compartment, designed, copied diligently, from those records of the long and busy life of Apollo, the magnificent, within his own library.

Still existing on the nutrient fluids, but now a figure of life that could not be told from Apollo himself, she turned on the activating currents of life-electric ulegrays and brought her sleeping Apollo-Pygmalion out of his sleep of gestation. She looked upon his opened eyes with almost, but subtly and horribly different affection which shone hypnotically from her eyes into the candid childlike blue of the eyes of "Apollo".

The great and beautiful man-body of the mighty android being lay and looked up at her adoringly with its great eyes, and she saw its mind was yet a child's.

It was long past midnight when she got the monstrous parody out of the vats and placed it in a dream-mech. She turned the current to the high, hypnotic notch, and placed there in the projection socket all the records, all the endless wire-spools of Apollo's past life and thought which had been carefully preserved in the record libraries, so that presently the android's mind was filled with the conviction that it *was* Apollo! Subtly and indetectably, the mind was also filled with a virulent poison of thought, a slavish and complete adoration of Ashtoroth, placed there by her own mind's careful watching insistence all through his laborious creation.

So now she had an Apollo of her own, and within its mind was no thought but what had been once Apollo's in the past, except that one thought: "obey Ashtoroth".

WEEKS HAD passed unnoticed, and Ashtoroth thrilled to see how long she had been at her work, how very near must be coming the day of her release into all the vast possibilities for pleasant sinning this mighty city could offer its ruler. For she had no doubt her plan would succeed.

She could not bear thus waiting. Her nerves would not hold still. Her muscles craved ever for the slow flux of the floods of pleasure ulegra through their fibres. Her mind groveled before the remembered images of her past infinite debaucheries. She set again to work to still her desires.

Another great body grew within the vats, but she was hurried and weary of the work, and "Phaeja" did

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not look wholly like Phaeja.

Days had passed, and with a subtle vindictive pleasure humming like a wasp in her inner mind, she set about building a viciously caricaturing figure of Cimiad, so close to Cimiad's appearance as to fool anyone, but yet with certain features slightly exaggerated so that Cimiad would not have so very great popularity from her beauty alone, or from the paths her mind would invariably take in conversation. Pleasant it was to make a wanton, capricious and wholly evil Cimiad, and pleasant it was to contemplate the shocking reaction of her former friends when the new "Cimiad" began to act out her inbuilt character.

And the cells of these creatures' minds believed wholly that they were slaves to another irrevocably and forever.

Now she and the quiet-faced technicians of her own race who had assisted her waited. The days dragged on for all of them, and their nerves shrieked at the waiting.

NOW AT last the fleets of the glorious Apollo, darkened the skies above Ptimus, the beautiful. For a day and a night the stream of ships poured down upon the city and upon the vast sphere of Tah nearby.

After short ceremonies of welcome, the mighty returned warriors took to their sleeping chambers, weary with the year-long voyage from far-speeding earth. The palace was silent, though out in the city and far off in Tah, the fireworks were set off and the welcoming parties went on all night and into the next day. But toward morning the palace of Apollo grew quiet. Through all its gargantuan complexities of corridors and lofty chambers was only sleep.

Now had come her opportunity, and Ashtoroth was not asleep!

Through the great doors of graven metal flanked by the tall winged serpents given Apollo by Phaeja, stole Ashtoroth's chosen, silent and swift as shadows, their secretive feet making tiny whisperings of doom.

Past the titanic marble form of Sue, his arms about the gleaming white polished shoulders of Sivian, Goddess of Izaracha, a gift long ago to Apollo from friends who greatly and mutually admired the Orian chief, Lord of Ithyivius.

Down the still corridors, the shadowed eyes of the paintings of noble figures of the mighty past followed these gliding figures, screaming silently from their painted world of flatness, of the danger!

And the white-veiled figure of Ashtoroth joined the swarthy, dark men from Hored and led them to the corridor which ended in the great doors of Apollo's sleeping chamber. On each side the door stood an officer of Apollo's personal guard, and at the side of each officer stood five tall worriors, sleepless and vigilant.

Now from each swarthy, hairy hand rolled from the shadows one small glistening fragile egg of death, and the small popping sound of their breaking against the wall at the feet of the twelve warriors was heard by them. Instantly each man drew weapon, flame sword in his right hand, deadly ray cylinder in his left. Six of them ran toward the source of the small white fragile spheres of death, and six of them drew a line of tall flesh and sinew across the door of the chamber of Apollo. Even as their limbs moved into this action, their heads dropped weakly upon their shoulders and their hands groped to

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their mouths. Their throats closed as the deadly yellow gas poured into their nostrils, and twelve strong warriors lay in death.

Swiftly the guards were dragged into the shadows and small metal tubes were squeezed under the crack of the door by Ashtoroth's own hands. The potent gas she had brewed herself squeezed into the sleep chamber from the little flexible plastic balls which she had enwrapped about the gas.

This gas was a different gas than the other, and her purpose was different in its use. For Ashtoroth had yet a use for the person of Apollo.

As the sleep became the deeper sleep of unconsciousness, Apollo saw the avid eyes and heavy red lips of Ashtoroth brooding over him, and said. "Go hence, temptress" and became then as one dead.

NOW, IN the morning, the palace awoke. Apollo rose and dressed himself, and went into the dining hall and breakfasted with his friends. He was strangely silent and said but little to them. At the hour of audience Apollo proclaimed a week of general rejoicing at his own safe return. Phaeja came and embraced him in the throne room. Came too, Cimiad, looking strangely different now after her long period of labor on the far-off earth, and embraced the ruler Apollo, and made pretty speeches that did not seem to ring quite true.

The gathered people cheered Apollo and his two famous and beloved friends, and the three sat themselves; Apollo upon the throne, and Cimiad and Phaeja in lower seats near at hand. Everything was right once again in the great city of Ptimus and in the palace of Apollo, it's *lofty* minded ruler.

But deep under the Cyclopean complexities of the vast royal palace were the prisons. In the most isolated cells, those guarded from ray tamper by metal impervious to all rays were three cells guarded each by new-come warriors from the armies of Apollo guards unknown to the usual garrison of the prison. In the three cells were three prisoners forbidden all contact with the world outside, forbidden even to behold the faces of their fellow men. Their food was specially prepared and brought to them by men wearing masks, for they were not to see the faces of any human being. All of which seemed strange, but the papers were in order and bore the personal great seal of Apollo himself and who could argue with that? It was not usual for the merciful Lord to be severe with prisoners.

Within the cells wept Cimiad, and cursed and fretted Phaeja, and sat dry-eyed and brooding Apollo himself. He wondered a long time how it was that one so renowned for intelligence as himself should yet be as big a fool as there were in all the etherean realms. And only his own logic made him answer in the dank silence of his cell saying: "Yet it is so!"

Outside of these three forbidden cells with their special guard, none knew in all the city of Ptimus or in all the great realm of Tah that anything was different than it had been before Apollo had left for earth.

In a few days the wedding of Ashtoroth and Apollo was consummated. At the same time, to make the appearance more artfully deceiving, Cimial wed Phaeja!

It was a crafty move, for Ashtoroth composed a letter to Phaeja's home in Um telling his relatives and ministers of his decision to remain

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(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 142) with Apollo in Ptimus for a long time to come.

The letter was an artful forgery placed upon the paper Phaeja used for his own letters to Apollo. It had Phaeja's own signature upon it, though the date was now different.

Likewise a similar artful preparation of deceiving script went out in Cimiad's own writing.

There was now no immediate danger that anyone would discover the three robots were not the rightful men and woman they seemed, and much can be done with power through a short time.

Now Ashtoroth was ruler in the mighty etherean sphere of Tah, and strange were the changes that took place. Strange too the lying rumor that the mighty Apollo slept not in the bed of the beautiful Ashtoroth, but at its foot like a trained dog!

THE THREE cells of Apollo and Phaeja and Cimiad were impervious to rays. So were many prison cells that rays from outside might not talk to the prisoners. It irked Ashtoroth that she might not gloat over their plight. She brooded over her ray that would not reach through the metal walls and show her the anguished thought in their minds.

Thinking thus, an idea came to her how she might torment, them, especially Cimiad.

She had the three prisoners placed in one small cell directly under the former apartments of Apollo. She hoped that Cimiad would be embarrassed by the continual presence of the two men and the lack of privacy, and that the two men might fall into conflict over Cimiad.

The roof she had prepared with a small opening that slid back to admit her rays. Now she could look in on the three unfortunate victims and read their minds, and torment them by inserting thoughts and impulses not their own.

As she looked in for the first time, Apollo was saying bitterly to Phaeja: "Are you glad now that we saved the immortal Ashtoroth from age and madness and brought her here to teach her wisdom and mercy and virtue?"

"It is not my fault, Apollo, that she found it so easy to use the opportunities you gave her so lavishly. If you were an hostage in Ashtoroth's home, would you not seize control if you found it so ridiculously simple?"

"Yes, I would."

"So would any of us. What she does with us now will be educational, too, to you who prate of the virtues of maintaining the ancient life-patterns, and of the wisdom in following the outworn precepts of the Elder wisdom, laws built for a people and a culture and science vastly different from our own today."

"We are apt to learn a great deal more of Ashtoroth and her pagan ways before we are through. We will not relish the learning." Cimiad was bitter in her despair, and somewhat scornful of Apollo's lack of vigilance in allowing Ashtoroth to do what she had done. "I have always detested her—the very sound of her name makes me bristle. She is a woman who cares not for other women. She would have a world filled with men and herself the only woman in it!"

Ashtoroth, amused, laughed triumphantly over her ray, so that all three minds below heard her, and said: "I shall get a great deal of strange pleasure out of you three wriggling creatures before death releases you from me." She sent a

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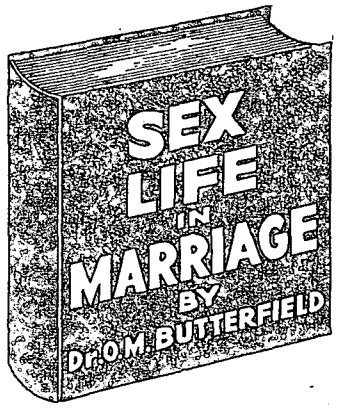
strong stim ray down upon Phaeja. His body undulated and trembled with the force of the flow of pleasure vibrant. "My pet, Phaeja, will yet decide where his heart casts anchor and where his will intends, my way or the way of the Elder council."

At this mark of her favor toward his friend, Apollo frowned upon Phaeja in sudden anger, as Ashtoroth intended. Cimiad drew a little way from him, and toward the seated Apollo. Where-upon Ashtoroth sent the impulse of jealousy into Phaeja, so that he frowned upon Cimiad and Apollo. Then Ashtoroth shifted the stim-ray upon the body of Apollo so that he too trembled from head to foot with the sudden overwhelming pleasure. "Apollo, you shall yet be glad to take the place of the poor robot at the foot of my bed." She laughed mockingly as his thoughts under her direction desired mightily this mercy from her, and in his mind she made him grovel before her, asking that this boon might come to pass. His real self writhed with shame at this debasement, not knowing surely whether it was his own vile impulses made him beg of this woman or no. Now she changed the stim rays to blue rays of pain, and flung them flooding down upon the small, sweet figure of Cimiad. She fell writhing to the floor with terrible pain. And Ashtoroth's voice gloated in Cimiad's mind alone: "You have your two lovers with you day and night, are you happy thus, little enemy? Have I not given you your heart's desire in double measure? Is not your imprisonment the greatest good I could give you? Why are you not grateful? Why do you hate Ashtoroth?" And subtly she made the minds of Apollo and Phaeja rejoice that the pain rays



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went to Cimiad and not to themselves, and despise themselves for this unworthy thought.

DAY BY day she made Cimiad's bright beauty to fade before the eyes of the two princes and rulers, and they grew to detest the sight of her inadvertently. It was a continual embarrassment to have her witness their shame and degradation.

Day by day she made their minds desire the coming of the rays from Ashtoroth's powerful pleasure mech, for their monotony of imprisonment had no relief but her visits. Try as they might, they could not think their own true thoughts, but only those thoughts given to them by Ashtoroth's alien attendants at watch over them now with rays. These thoughts were hate of each other, disgust with all their bodily presence, so that every breath each drew seemed an imposition upon the privacy and silence of the other. No matter what they tried to say to each other to alleviate these unnatural repellances and disgusts, the words came out uncouth and malappropriate.

Day followed day, and this continual tempering with their minds bore fruit, so that they stared at each other continually like wild animals wishing to spring at each other's throats.

She also made them both desire the slim beautiful body of Cimiad continually, but in a vile disgusting way. Their minds shrank from this continual vicious thought, suspecting it was their own, born of close imprisonment and unnatural life together. And when she herself, Ashtoroth, threw her stim rays down upon them from where she lay in luxury on the couch of Apollo, and spoke mildly and pleasantly to them, it was as a great light of glory coming into their darkness. She made the two males to hate Cimiad, as standing between themselves and Ashtoroth's full pleasuring of them and herself.

When she gave Cimiad her daily hours of pain over the ray, they rejoiced inadvertently in Cimiad's agony, and cursed themselves for so rejoicing as though it were their own selves responsible for the alien, unworthy thought.

Week followed week, and they were changed from their former brilliant health and beauty to thin emaciated creatures, and madness shone from their eyes upon each other, held in check still by iron wills and cultured, unbreaking minds.

Ashtoroth gloated over the change, and devised ever new methods of giving them endless mental anguish.

Upstairs, in the throne room, Ashtoroth used her ancient methods of acquiring strong and loyal supporters. One of her favorite methods was by seducing the young officers of Apollo's loyal legions to her bed, and this had two fine results. First it made the military clique hold "Apollo" in despite. Second, it made the recipient of these favors look to Ashtoroth for orders, and avoid contact with Apollo as one apt to wreak his anger upon him at any time. And thirdly, Ashtoroth enjoyed the business mightily.

The false Apollo stood complaisant at her side like a servant while the luscious plump Ashtoroth held nightly revels and fearfully contrived debauches in the great palace. The young people of the city came to know that Ashtoroth was the true ruler and Apollo now, by some strange sorcery, but a puppet upon her string. These young minds were carefully weaned by Ashtoroth's

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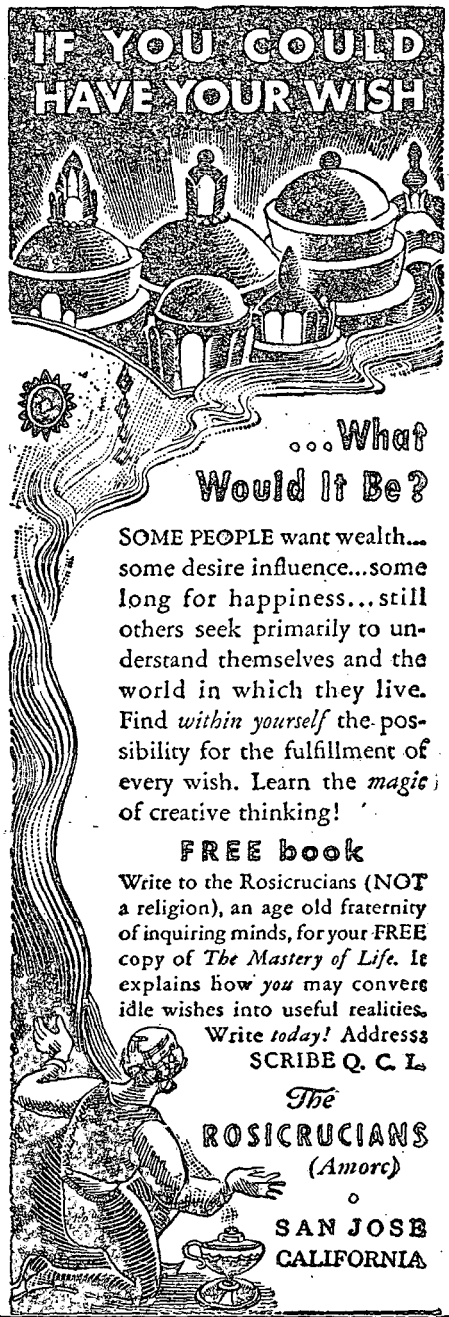
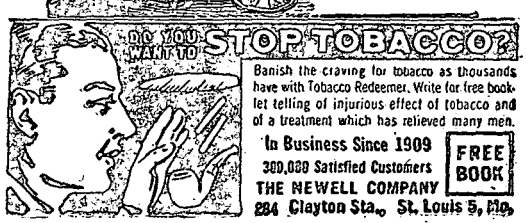
words and favors from their thin varnish of high-minded idealism, founded as it was not on experience but upon teachings, and they found that progress and advancement came from pandering to the queen, and not on achievement or ability in other fields.

Likewise the scientists learned that when they wanted something they must go to the queen, for "Apollo" who had been lavish heretofore was now able to give them but empty promises and resounding phrases to all their requests. Gradually all the most important posts of the empire were given to men from far Hored, and narrow-eyed black-bearded men connived and mulcted all the innocent unwary of the great people of Tah. These were often men who had come to congratulate their ruler in Hored on her new estate in Tah, and had remained at her nod by invitation. These swarthy conniving outlanders now held all the posts of official power, and the great land of Tah had become so swiftly the footstool for the swarthy, hard-eyed men from Hored.

Many and great were the impositions under which the people of the country suffered. Murmuring grew into open action against the Queen's favorites, and some of them were murdered. Ashtoroth laughed when they came cravenly to her for protection, and asked them if they had not better try the paths of virtue.

Meanwhile her lusts and carouses and open flouting of all custom and discretion became the favorite topic of discussion in the social gatherings of the land, and Ashtoroth was often defended for her actions by those who thought that lust and love are one and freedom another name for what was coming upon the land under Ashtoroth's lewd ministrations.





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Men and women, when grouped in these scandal mongerings and discussions of the fate of the people under the new state of affairs talked most of Ashtoroth. Her beauty and her mind-tampering ray-hands' work in their minds had already enslaved many of the stronger of these people to her following. Though her behavior was as stench in the land, all those who had been irked by the ancient restrictions upon license found in her a savior, and spoke well of her.

NOW, Ashtoroth and her scientists from Hored were not the only creatures who had ever built a robot reproduction of a human being. Far from that, there was a well-grown science of constructing such creatures out of synthesized flesh, and many of their more careful products were in great demand in certain not too secret circles. The process was well known, in a hush-hush way, and when Cimiad and Phaeja failed to return to their own possessions and put their affairs in order after their marriage, and when the unusual and sinister whispers of Cimiad's peculiar and unnatural behavior came to the ears of the loyal female warriors who served and loved Cimiad, and came to the ears of those who loved Phaeja, the men of Um who knew Phaeja and Cimiad well, a large dead rat was smelled by them.

Since logic showed them but one way in which Ashtoroth might have turned the tables upon Apollo, investigation showed them that this could have taken place—nay, must have taken place.

Logic, carefully exercised, showed them several paths by which the tables could be turned back again upon the fleshly lust in woman-form called Ashtoroth.

Those men of Apollo's who had left the capital when they were slighted and forgotten, and all those who had followed Cimiad and Phaeja under Apollo, a mighty army, in truth, comprising much of the strength of Um and of the Norse, and much of the strength of Cimiad's own queendom of Noad, and her men from Rak, that place which had joined itself to her out of sheer admiration and for no other reason. This suddenly gathered strength lay not far outside Ptimus, and sent in secretly messengers who apprised the still loyal warriors of the armies of the truth of what had occurred. These began deserting to the fleet lying out of ray range in open spaces, and the strength of Ashtoroth shrank daily, and the quietly waiting fleet grew by scores of ships daily.

Came the day when Ashtoroth, rousing her luxurious, soft body from sleep, and getting at last out of her busy bed, was handed a large piece of parchment sealed with a seal strange to her. It read:

"To the usurper Ashtoroth, false ruler of Ptimus and Tah. We know that your Apollo is but a robot. For we have with us the true Apollo and the true Cimiad and Phaeja. Therefore it were better for you to flee at once than for you to await the sure and terrible punishment we will visit upon you."

Her large and lovely knees knocking together at this ugly awakening, Ashtoroth flashed her telaug beams down into the cell beneath her feet where the prisons of Apollo and Cimiad and Phaeja still lay in despair. And she knew that the message they had the true Apollo was but a bluff. Still, they might also have a false Apollo every bit as good as her own.

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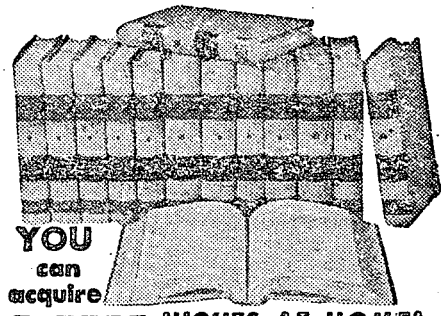
To her she called Hamnar, her dark and capable master of ships in Hored, Admiral now of all the Navies of Tah. Silently she handed him the large-sealed envelope, torn open, and the wide parchment it had contained. Gloomily he read, looking askance at her lewd nakedness, which she strove not to conceal greatly except at ceremonial functions.

Hamnar was not an overly impetuous man. He pursed his lips and hummed, then blew out his breath in thoughtful hah's. "It may be, my Ashtoroth, that I can drive these avenging friends of the imprisoned Lord away *this* time. But now that your betrayal of your parole to Apollo is known to the people of Tah—and you can be sure these enemies have been very careful to so aware the people— I should say that soon or late they will have your head and mine too, and many another about. Revolt after revolt will flare against you in this mighty land, and on the other planets that hold allegiance to Apollo, and in time the Central Council will look into the disturbances and uncover the truth for themselves. It is a situation which depended entirely upon secrecy, and that secrecy has been wiped out by circumstances, by your own careless activities, and by the acuteness of these friends of the Lord Apollo. I see no answer but swift and instant flight in the arrowships of Apollo. We can loot the palace of enough gold and gauds to make the venture not all loss. They will never catch the ships I have kept in readiness for just this combination of circumstance. They are the fleetest ships in all the fleets of Tah, built but recently, some of them, at my own orders. In time, we will find refuge in distance. Otherwise



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there is little chance of our surviving for long."

"We will fight, Hamnar, we will fight and we will die—but flee we will not!"

"The trouble with *that* is, my loved Ashtoroth, our captains and pilots, those not of the blood from Hored, have been steadily deserting for weeks by the scores and the hundreds of scores. They of course, take with them, each desertion, a few more ships to this fleet lying out of range of our base ray. We have now not near enough loyal men, or ships either, to fight *with*, and those are not dependable, held only by innocent ignorance and disbelief of the things they have heard. They too would largely desert upon the slightest evidence of the true fate of Apollo. Call it off, Ashtoroth, and let us seek the free paths of space, sure we can do as well in less antagonistic fields of endeavor. Our talents will not go to waste! We will soon have not a thousand ships, and those undermanned by our own men of Hored, and you cannot fight with those!"

Ashtoroth had learned at last to listen to reason from the mouths of her generals. So it was that a few hundred ships arrowed swiftly up into the night from the great glittering etherean city of Ptimus and the name Ashtoroth was known no more except as a bawdy joke in all those regions of Etherea. And they had no sooner lifted into the hiding dark than down upon the city descended the thousands of fire-ships from Um and from the many planets of the Nors, and from Noad and from Rak, and they were vastly welcomed in the city.

Up toward the dark palace now clanked a legion of marching female warriors, and a legion of men from Um, the tall blond Nors of that city in the blue and scarlet of Phaeja with the winged serpent, topped by the serpent and wand of Apollo, upon the shoulder, in their hands the ray rifles ready.

Clanking up through the streets and into the broad avenues of the Cyclopean palace came the great ray tanks from the bowels of the ships of the fleet. And they found the palace silent and occupied by but a few hiding left-overs from Hored.

Pitiful was the sight of their beloved Apollo and of Phaeja and Cimiad, their hair grown to their waists, their bones barely held together by their flesh, and their eyes staring pools of madness and hunger.

It was a long time before the marriage of Phaeja and Cimiad took place. And it was longer yet before their love for each other came again to full bloom, for the evil work of Ashtoroth's subtle hands putting powered telaug thoughts into their minds, etching them deep in lying, hideous, seeming truth, had limned their minds with strange hates and vile images which time alone could cure or erase.

According to Oahspe, these three still live in the etherean realms. Their love still blooms, and there too, Gur has become a mighty figure, an elected God with his gentle and gracious Suima now a vast and capable and still gentle and loving Goddess herself. A fit mate for a God. And whether this Gur of Oahspe is the same Gur of this story, I do not know. Nor do you!

THE END

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MURDER MOON

☆ By John Weston ☆

BLACKIE FENTON crouched behind the outcropping of quartz, his feet ankle deep in the powdery pumice of the Lunar surface. His bulbuous helmet glittered strangely against the age-old shades and shadows. The fierce-beating sun left him untouched for the rocky protuberance sheltered as well as hid him.

Blackie cradled the slim barrel of the rifle in his bulky plasto-gloves. A touch of the side button and a searing lance of flame would lash out from the muzzle—to crisp, Blackie thought, the tall figure of the man for whom he waited.

Blackie licked his lips. Claren was carrying in the small case on his suit, better than three hundred thousand credits of natural diamond, the fruit of hard labor and luck. But Blackie was going to share it with Claren, even if the latter didn't know it.

He'd gun him down with a single stab of flame, take the flask, make the three hour trek back to Station three, and then grab ship to Earth. He was all set.

Cautiously he peered over the rim of the outcropping—and then dropped back! Claren was coming. He could see the weird dusty puffs characteristic of walking on the powdery surface. He waited until the lone figure passed his observation point. As soon as Claren had gone by, Blackie brought up the flame rifle.

He fired once, deliberately and accurately. The needle of death lashed out momentarily and its furious intensity was brighter than the sun.

Claren dropped. Gleefully Blackie ran toward the prone figure. Blackie bent over the man. As he picked up the container and put it in a pouch at his side, the body jerked convulsively. In the back of his mind, he realized that the man was still in the throes of the death agony. Stonily, he turned after peering into the pouch to make sure the diamonds were there.

Suddenly he turned. Blackie made one dive for the figure but it was too late. Claren had the flame rifle. The stud flared briefly and Blackie felt the lance, a blossom of exquisite agony, flare into his chest.

Claren held both fingers against the twin holes in his suit. He could make it back to the post. Blackie hadn't made sure. But Claren had. He locked both fingers of of one hand into the holes, and used the other to fire the rifle again. But Blackie was through—he didn't feel the secondary lashes...

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READER'S PAGE

A GREAT NOVEL

Sirs:

I still can't get over the December issue of FA. Colossal, stupendous, and terrific are not potent enough words to describe it. I'm referring, of course, to Rog Phillips' "The Involuntary Immortals". I consider this as one of the ten best stf-fantasy novels that you have ever published. As one of the members of the S.F.C.T.C. put it, "Rog Phillips is somewhat of an intellectual Ray Bradbury and realistic Van Vogt."

The only fault I could find with the novel was that it was too good! It reminded me of Van Vogt's "Slan" which had to do with mutants. But Phillips' story had more realism, less conflicting details, and as a whole, was easier to read. I say, let's have a sequel!

"The Runaround" by Craig Browning was the best of the shorter lengths. A fine little stf tale, really one of the best shorts I've ever read. "The Cybernetic Brain" was good too, but reminiscent of the earlier days of AS and FA. "The Bottle" was a rehash of an old theme. And "The Column of Life" was a poor yarn.

I'd like to see a nice long Reader's Page, as this is one of the best features of FA and ranks high with me and the club I belong to. As for Robert Hubmann's gripe re the fact that he isn't satisfied with FA because he reads an issue on an average of two hours, the only solution I can think of for this super-fast reader, is that he should—read slower!

All in all, a swell issue.

Calvin Thomas Beck
Director, S.F.C.T.C.
Hotel Flanders
135 W. 47th St.
New York 19, N.Y.

Hey, Calvin, looks like you really solved Bob Hubmann's problem. Or, if that doesn't work, perhaps he can close one eye and turn the book upside down. Maybe that would slow him down a bit!.....Ed.

REDEEMED, HE SAYS

Sirs:

FA has redeemed itself. There was one horrendous period, not too many months ago when the Reader's Page was gone and the longest story in the book was 10,000 words. But now what do we find? A masterful cover, a Reader's Page, and a terrific novel by Rog Phillips in the December ish.

Phillips is the master of a new type of stf writing—not too much adventure, but plenty of thick, fascinating scientific information. His immortality theme was inferior to Chester S. Geier's wonderful story, "Forever Is Too Long", but then, almost any story would be inferior to that one. I think that Phillips hurt his story with too much "dream interpretation," but the idea was well carried out. Immortality as a theme, has been used many times, and always successfully.

Charles Recour's "Cybernetic Brain" was very good. Give an experienced author a new science such as cybernetics, and he'll come up with a highly original tale. I can recollect only one other story having a similar background, which is a high form of flattery.

Archette is capable of better work than he showed in "The Bottle." It did have a good twist at the end though.

"Runaround" is one of the cleverest shorts of this type that I've read. The story got better as it went along, with a great punch ending.

The new format is good, but I still think there is room for improvement. For one thing, there is too much space between lines. Can't you shove the type a little closer together? As for policy, I'm not particular. Publish fantasy in AS and stf in FA. Just so they're good stories I'll be satisfied...

Robert Silverberg
760 Montgomery St.
Brooklyn 13, N.Y.

We're glad you liked the Phillips novel so well, Bob. And now how about a word or two on Theodore Sturgeon's novel of last month. As for the type in FA, we're working on a new production setup for a better style of type. Keep watching coming issues.....Ed.

ANOTHER HUBMANN!

Sirs:

Re the letter of Bob Hubmann in the December issue of FA, I, with your kind permission, will second his gripe. I have the same trouble he has! I sit down at 2:00 p.m. and by 4:00 p.m. of the same day I have turned the last page of the book and sit back with a sigh and a far-away look in my eyes. What to do?...

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I thought that the cover this month was bad—in the sense that the scene it depicted did not actually occur in the novel. May I suggest that your artists stick a little more closely to the context of the story?

As for the novel, all I'll say is that during the years I've read FA, Rog Phillips has never written a bad story.

Considering the fact that I'm a new writer to the Reader's Page, I'd like to see this letter published. How're my chances?

Betty Jane Buzzo
934 E. 4th St.
Long Beach, Cal.

It begins to look as if we're going to have to announce the formation of a new club—the "We Read Fantastic Adventures Too Fast Society"! If enough readers join it we'll be forced to put out FA weekly! (Hey, ain't that a grand idea?) Anyway, welcome into the fold, Betty, and let's hear from you again. .....Ed.

GANLEY CHECKS IN

Sirs:

At last a long novel! It's a sad state of affairs that a novel has not graced the pages of FA for quite a while. Seems to me that it's Phillips' first novel-length yarn since "So Shall Ye Reap". It's not as good, but I suppose Rog overdid himself on that first one. I mean, that it's not a classic. But it was a very interesting story, well-written and well-plotted. Anyhow, I read it at one sitting, and at no time was I bored. I'll probably re-read it in a couple of months.

So, naturally, first place in the issue goes to Phillips. (You can't put a novel up against short stories like "Blue Bottle Fly" or "Five Years in the Marmalade".) Also, this is the best issue of the year. You are not only out of a slump, you have hit your sixty-first home run.

The second best story in the issue was "Runaround" by Browning. I wouldn't exactly call it a "different" story, but it was a good one. Except—if humans will have bulbous heads etc in the future, what about cats? Why should they remain unchanged?

Now for the Reader's—that's me—Page. I seem to have made up about half of it, which is no way to treat your other 999,999 readers. Whazzamatter, doesn't anyone else write in?

In looking over the illos for this issue I find that none of them are particularly bad, but all of them could be a lot better. Why I'll bet there are quite a few fans who could do as good. (Fightin' words.)

As to Bob Hubmann's problem. I think I have a solution: Put FA back to 242 pages. Eh? Did I hear an evil mutter about paper shortages? Still another solution is to reduce the space between lines of type. That would increase the wordage and add a

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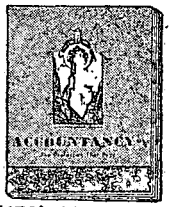

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minute or two to Bob's reading time!

Glad to hear that David V. Reed will be back soon with a novel. Hope his novel is that and not a novelette. Too many of your stories have been novelettes. And where the dickens is Toffee? I didn't realize it before, but I miss her mis-adventures now. Also, what ever happened to Lawrence Chandler? And how about Edmond Hamilton?

Guess that's all for now. I'm going to settle back and read a stf novel, "Nineteen Eighty-Four".

W. Paul Ganley
119 Ward Road
N. Tonawanda, N.Y.

We must say you have a flattering idea of how many readers we have, Paul..... How come you guessed so close? (All right, who are we fooling!) Guess you'll just have to get used to the idea that your letters will be published. Heck now, you don't want a reject, do you? As to Toffee, we won't say anything definite right now, but we received word via Pluto that a new Toffee yarn is in preparation —and a long one to boot. We'll just have to wait and see.....Ed.

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WE'RE BEING BOILED

Sirs:

Most of the time I buy FA or AS I bawl myself out for being criminally stupid—especially after reading an issue of "Astounding". But, I remember such tales as "Peril In Dragonia", and I know that if stories like that are published in your magazines they must still be worth 25c.

Stories like PLD teach people to think. As long as I can see a new idea, a new slant, or an honest effort to be helpful, I'll not call you the things you should be called.

Never did like you, maybe never will. But I'll still thank you for a yarn like Mollie Claire's. That alone keeps me from boiling you in oil.

Steve Oreskey
2248 N. Jackson
?

You shouldn't feel stupid for reading FA and AS, Steve. But did you have some reason for omitting the home town? Anyway, we're glad you liked one of our yarns. Maybe if you look hard enough you may find one or two more.....Ed.

RAISE THE DEAD?

Sirs:

Recently in the letter section of FA a lot of people have been asking for a sequel to "The Man From Yesterday." You keep saying, "Oh, we'll ask Lee Francis to do a sequel." Yet in the March AS in the Observatory, you stated that Lee Francis was dead. And you still say you'll ask him to do a sequel. Good trick if you can do it.

The cover this month, December, was very good. But I'd like to see more St. John work. That's about all for now, except that I, for one, would like to see more fantasy in FA.

Brian McNaughton
198 Bergen Place
Red Bank, N.J.

Guess it's about time we cleared up the matter of Lee Francis and "The Man From Yesterday." It is true that Lee Francis was originally a penname for that great writer of science-fantasy, Leroy Yerxa. But since Leroy's death, we have allowed a few author good writers to use the penname. The real author of TMFY is none other than Howard Browne, who has just returned to the masthead of your favorite magazine as Editor. We've been trying to talk Howard (Lee) into doing a sequel to his popular novel, but so far he just shrugs and says, maybe. But we'll keep pitching. How about you readers sending in a flood of mail to Howard and letting him know just how you all feel about Avar .....Ed.

WHY THE DELAY?

Sirs:

This letter of criticism probably won't

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get published because I am only thirteen, but here goes.

I'm a new reader of AS and FA, and as such I find the Reader's Page one of the most popular features of your magazine. But I would like to know why it takes so long to get a letter published. Months go by before it hits print. If the letters could be a little more current, I'd like your magazine a lot more.

As for the rest of the magazine, the only thing wrong is that sometimes the covers don't exactly illustrate a scene from the story they are supposed to. What about this?

Jerry Copher
4763 Cupples Place
St. Louis 13, Mo.

The reason for the apparent delay in publishing letters is quite simple, Jerry. Right now, as we write this, the December issue of FA is still on sale. Yet we are preparing the March issue, in which this letter appears. We just can't work it any closer, unless you can get a time machine and buy a copy of FA a couple of months before it hits the stands! As to the covers, very often the artist will depict a symbolic scene, one that is in the story by implication rather than actuality. This is necessary at times so that the scene can be presented on the cover as simply as possible, with as much dramatic impact as well. And we'd like to add that we're glad to present your letter, and hope you'll be writing us again.....Ed.

SLIPSTICK SHARPIE

☆ By A. Morris ☆

IF THE pattern of the future is predicted by any present events, we can judge that by nineteen-ninety, everybody over the age of six—and maybe younger—will be lugging a slide-rule around. It's a fact that the most characteristic feature of modern times, is our preoccupation with numbers.

And since they mean so much, it's wise to be able to handle them. The slide rule is the answer as every engineering student knows. The trouble is so many people think of that tool as a mysterious, esoteric device, belonging to Einstein-type minds, that they hesitate to learn anything about it.

But that's gradually changing. There are many good manufacturers of the gadgets in this country and they're pushing their wares for all their worth. Nowadays the badge of a college student is the slide rule dangling from his belt. In an age of automatic brains and mechanical computing machines, a slide rule is a man's right arm. It after all, is a mechanical computing machine, a device for adding and subtracting logarithms. Get on the band, gang, the slipstick's the thing!

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FABLES FROM THE FUTURE

★ By Lee Owens ★

VISIT IN THE DAWN

KAH SAW the intrusion. He saw it from its inception. The simple mind encased in his Neanderthal's skull didn't comprehend it, but his eyes saw it.

First the sky filled with roaring fire. Kah lay in his lair and trembled when that happened. For a moment fear prodded him and he half arose to flee, but the innate sense of curiosity overcame the fear—especially since no food seemed involved here, no food that could bite back!

Nevertheless, Kah lay there trembling, his powerful limbs twitching with the feeling of terror, yet he followed the whole affair. The roar and flame increased. Kah gripped his clumsy stone-headed spear tighter. Behind his sloping forehead, the mind churned to rudimentary reason. What manner of strange beast was this which appeared with blasting fires in the heavens?

The very flame enveloped the earth a thousand paces from Kah and then miraculously the flaming ceased and as if by some strange magic, Kah's eyes saw a large spherical boulder as big around as two men's height. But this boulder was shiny and smooth. Even at this distance the sharp eyes of Kah noticed these details.

The fear drained from Kah with the fire. There was nothing to be afraid of. He started to walk toward the strange boulder.

Abruptly he stopped and flung his naked length to the ground, as if to press out a hiding place for himself. But the vegetation concealed him adequately.

Kah watched a strange opening appear in the side of the boulder, and from it emerge three strange creatures who walked on four legs but whose shape and skins were like those of Chah the Big Glider—the reptile Kah hated so much.

The Neanderthal watched silently for a long time and nothing more happened. The strange creatures disappeared over a ridge to the south of the boulder and they did not return at once. Kah ventured nearer the boulder, his curiosity now bold and excited. He would touch the boulder. And he did.

He jumped back in alarm at the warmth that came from it. He peered in its opening and the profusion of weird things made no impression on him. He saw nothing but shiny "stone".

Bold now that nothing untoward had happened, Kah tried to crawl into the opening but he ceased after once almost getting stuck. He stuck in the stone-tipped point of

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his spear, and probed around the interior of the boulder. At first nothing happened.

Suddenly the spear head contacted something inside and the weapon was wrenched from Kah's grasp as the boulder shot skyward! Kah screamed with terror and fell back. He watched the boulder rise into the sky, flames enveloping its bottom. Then in a gigantic curve, it arced over and disappeared far away into the sea—far out into the watery surface.

Frightened Kah stared at the spot where the boulder had vanished, Suddenly he was aware of the three strange things. From the tentacle of one of them shot an unbearable light—and Kah died, rooted to the spot from which he had inadvertently sent the strangers' boulder...and the strangers did not live long after...

* * *

THE CRYSTALLINE BEAST

IF YOU'RE ever in the mood to while away a Sunday afternoon, and you're tired of the tourist Luna runs, or the video becomes a little boring, why don't you grab a rocket to Stellarport in Washinton? The Zoological Gardens there are now exhibiting that singular Plutonian specimen, the Ice-Beast, the only one so far captured. While it is of prime interest to scientists, the public is permitted to see the strange creature on Sundays.

And it *is* strange. Biologists and biophysicists have known for a long time that there was a very broad line between so-called "organic" and inorganic matter. The dividing line between living and non-living things is by no means very sharp. Interplanetary exploration broadened this idea. Until the capture of the Ice-Beast, nothing so odd had been encountered.

When you step into the larger wing of the building which houses the monster, you'll file past a long heavy quartz window, and unless it's feeding time you won't see a great deal. But if you're lucky you'll see the "thing" being fed with heat and it's a weird sight indeed.

The Farnsworthy Expedition caught the creature on Pluto. The capture cost two lives incidentally, the lives of two of the crew who were so unfortunate as to let the crystalline mass engulf them for a moment.

The Zoological Gardens has had a huge refrigerated room built in to provide the proper environment for the monster. And as you walk by it, you see a crystalline mass, lying sluggish and inert in one corner. It weighs thirty tons and with the density of water, it is of good size indeed. It should have the density of water—for it is water!

Yes, the living specimen of water consists of large ice-crystals with some strange binding forces and some weird nervous system. It moves slowly, crackling and hissing over the insulated floor and it appears

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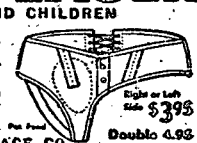

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incapable of action—that is, until it senses heat. Then it bursts into furious activity hurling its ponderous bulk hither and yon in an inconceivably vicious fashion, seeking out the heat-source that it may drain it. How the nervous system of the Ice-Beast absorbs this, is unknown, but in some fashion the energy is absorbed and stored. It uses energy at a high or low temperature.

It is known that great numbers of these creatures occupy the frozen Plutonian plains and that they were the cause of the loss of three expeditions to the planet back in ninety-three. Whether or not the vast mineral deposits of the planets will be utilizable will depend to a great extent on what scientists learn about destroying these weird intelligences—for they have an intelligence of a rudimentary sort. More important is what will be learned about the nature of life.

So make the jaunt. It's worth while. And when that sleepy mass gazes at you with its many-faceted points, think that sight is focused on you—believe me, you'll be chilled...

* * *

THE CHILL

I'VE KNOCKED around the System most of my life and I've seen a lot of things. I've even made a sub-etheric blast to Antares—the eleventh planet of their system. My profession is engineering—good practical engineering. Give me the tools and the men and I'll build whatever you name—a space-ship or a toothpick. The point I'm making is that I've seen just about everything strange under a dozen suns. And somebody always asks me what my toughest job was or what the queerest thing I saw, was.

Well, it's easy to answer that one. I was in charge of the reception committee for the Zanides from Vega! You'll ask right away—"an engineer on the reception committee? That's ridiculous!" Maybe you don't remember their visit. If you did you wouldn't wonder. The Zanides are the strangest people—if I can use the word—who live in our Universe.

The reason they impress me so, is because I had to get up living quarters for them. We located them in the desert Co-o on Mars about thirty kilometers from Aren City. This was so that they could be close enough for communication with the Council—and far enough away from heat!

The Zanides have a metabolic system based on an extremely low-level of energy. They are in effect little more than thoughts. But they are material beings and they can't stand high energy levels in any form. Heat, light, electricity—you name it—it's too rough for them.

So they told me to build living quarters for these creatures. And I did. I built an enormous refrigerator—actually less than

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a refrigerator than an insulated box. It was the size of a small shipyard it seemed, before I was finished, but its walls were *seventy* feet thick!

And it was in here that the Zanides lived and ate—those words just don't seem to fit. They existed in the mighty tomb. We allowed no one, we allowed nothing to come within range of them. They would have liked to locate themselves in space but the authorities wanted them on the planet, so that's why we went all out to make them comfortable.

You couldn't light a match within ten kilometers of them for fear they complain. Of course they couldn't help it. It was their nature. Any sort of an energy pulse would cause them pain. Cosmic radiation they absorbed but anything coarser, they detested.

Well, as you know, their visit worked out well—it's from them we got the thought-screens and a lot about telepathic communication systems. But that gigantic tomb still stands in the Martian desert. I wonder if we'll ever get another visit from them? I doubt it. They may like us—but a people who have molten fluids in their bodies are too much for the Zanides!

* * *

ANDROID REVOLT!

HENRY CARLTON sweated over the paperwork. "Let's see," he muttered to himself, "four point oh six eight, the sixth root, um, um..." The slide rule flew beneath his fingers. The research was progressing nicely. Soon he'd be able to build the counter and detector. He'd have to talk with Lesser. Lesser was the director of the Labs.

The annunciator on the desk buzzed. Henry punched the button. "Yes?" he said.

"Lesser talking," the speaker rattled. "Will you come into my office please. Couple of points I'd like to clear up. G.H.Q. is asking questions."

Henry put down the pencil and slide and walked out of his office. The guard outside the door half-saluted, but Henry knew he was being carefully scrutinized. They couldn't take chances. The Androids were smart.

He walked down the corridors of the laboratory fortress. Would it end in victory or defeat?, he asked himself. Since the robot revolt, the Androids had taken half the world, the fibrous brain structures beating Man at his own game. Here in upper North America, the Humans were holding their own, but more and more it became difficult to counter-attack. It was too easy for the Androids to masquerade as Humans and filter in and destroy. That's what the lab was working on—a suitable detector of the mechanical creatures.

The guard admitted him to Lesser's of-

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fice. The Chief of Android Research, a tall powerfully built man, sat behind his desk and greeted him heartily.

"Come in, Carlton," he boomed. "How are you doing with the gamma wave job?"

Henry shrugged. "It seems to be coming along, Chief," he said, "but it's slow, too damned slow."

"Well, don't worry too much about it," Lesser said cheerily. "You're the best man we've got on the job. You know electronic brains inside out. The Androids will never get the last of us as long as you're with us."

Henry looked puzzled at the unaccustomed flattery. "I'm not so sure about that," he said worriedly, "I hear that they've broken through along the coast at several points."

Henry was standing in front of Lesser's desk while they were speaking. Suddenly the Lab head stood up facing him. Henry looked at him closely—and was struck with an awful thought—this couldn't be Lesser! —but it was so fantastic that he dismissed it immediately.

At that same instant, both Lesser's hands raised and shot over the desk, pulling Henry against it and then clamping about his throat. Simultaneously, Henry saw the body lying on the floor just in back of the desk.

The horrified realization came to Henry even as the life was being choked out of him—the supposed Lesser was an Android! And he, Man's hope—was dying. The Androids has triumphed...

☼ ☼ ☼

PSYCHO...

MOST OF the time, the analyzers get 'em. It has to be that way or there'd be more wrecks in space than there are ships. Every spaceman from here to Bleakport on Pluto, takes a check-out before he steps aboard one of the cans.

But once in a great while, once out of a million times or more, a psycho—permanent or temporary—will slip through. Usually it's the temporary ones who make it because their patterns, the neuronic ones, aren't as fixed. The machines are good, and the medicos act as a double check, but there's always a chance that a mentally upset case will board a rocket craft—then space-madness; and if the victim isn't grabbed...

That's what happened to the *Feckner III.* Brand new, just out of the Ketnnung yards on Mars City, she took aboard her crew in the usual routine fashion. As always the boys passed through the psycho-analyzers. There was no trouble, no one was stopped and she shipped out. The medico in charge who had examined the crew members swore before the investigating court that he hadn't spotted the slightest abnormality—but then it was too late any-

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way. The lunatic got on ship.

The two survivors described the picture vividly. They were both engineers who had been checking the life-boats when they spotted the madman. They were about to enter lock number three when they saw the fellow enter the passageway.

He saw them and stopped. "You fools," he cried, "I'm going to stop this horrible thing. Men weren't made for space!" His voice was a half-shriek and he was drooling at the mouth. Both engineers knew immediately what was up. The fanatic was obviously struck with the ever-present malady of space-madness.

He held a package in his arms. He shouted and cursed violently, then disappeared behind the door leading to the engine-room. The senior grabbed a phone line to the control room and told the story. The captain immediately ordered an "abandon ship". The engineers waited to hear no more. They were in a boat and away from the freighter before the Captain had finished talking.

So they saw the flaring blast as the uranium pile disintegrated through whatever trigger the madman had employed. The ship was completely scattered into small masses of wreckage, and though the engineers searched the remnants they found no survivors.

A case like this isn't common. But space-madness is such a peculiar sickness, so weird and unexpected that only persons of extremely strong emotional make-up can be trusted to astrogate the big ones. They're not on a positive identification now. Maybe they'll make the perfect psycho-machines yet—they've got too...

* * *

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AT WHITE SANDS, New Mexico, they're working like mad with the two-step rocket. No it isn't a dance—it's a "Neptune-type" mounted on a "V-2." The combination will reach hitherto astounding heights. The V-2 portion of the double rocket will lift the Neptune to fifty or so miles. Then the Neptune will take off from their climbing into the atmosphere—and beyond—maybe to two hundred and fifty miles!

What good is it all? First and foremost it's a matter of developing rockets. We need them for peace—and for war. Secondly, scientists are curious to know exactly what the thin borderline region between air and space is like. The Neptune will bring down samples and will radio back a continual line of data on the electrical and optical properties of the upper atmosphere. Furthermore, it will help in solving the greatest mystery of science today—what are cosmic rays?

And as always, these rockets are just one step closer to the Moon rocket which

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* * *

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FOR HIGH speed photography—like photography moving bullets or rockets, you need an intense burst of light for an extremely short time. The best light sources and the best shutters are still too slow for the kind of work the boys want to do. They've gotten around to using a Kerr cell, which is a cylinder of liquid nitrobenzene—Danger!—and which has the unique property of acting like a shutter when put in an electric field.

Now a scientist has come along with a crystal version of this gadget which makes use of the polarizing effects of crystalline materials. Stick the crystal in a strong high voltage field and bango!—the crystal is transparent to light. Pop off the voltage and no light comes through. The amazing thing here is that all this is a matter of tens of a microsecond! That's a mighty short time.

What it means is that we'll know a lot more about what happens when it happens in a hurry, if it's a bullet or if it's a connecting rod. Radar chopped time into microseconds. The new shutter will chop the microseconds into tiny fractions. A wink is a long, long time....

* * *

BLIND SPOT

A NOTED neurologist has suggested that in time, as we come to know more and more about the nature of the brain, we may be able to create the senses of man! Astonishing as this fact is, it is slowly materializing in the laboratories today.

It is a known fact that when certain areas and nerve-endings on the surface of the brain are stimulated by electrical impulses, the mind experiences sensations which we know as "seeing" or "hearing". Imagine in the future, the neurologists suggest, if you can, a scanning device similar to a TV set, connected directly to these sensitive surfaces. Thus equipped, a man would possess an artificial sight. Thus there is some distant hope for a totally blind person.

Hearing aids, correspondingly would be infinitely more sensitive and would create the illusion of perfect hearing, a faculty which present devices lack.

These may be mere speculations now, but such dreams have a way of coming true. It is safe to predict at least partial success along the suggested lines, in the not—too-distant future.

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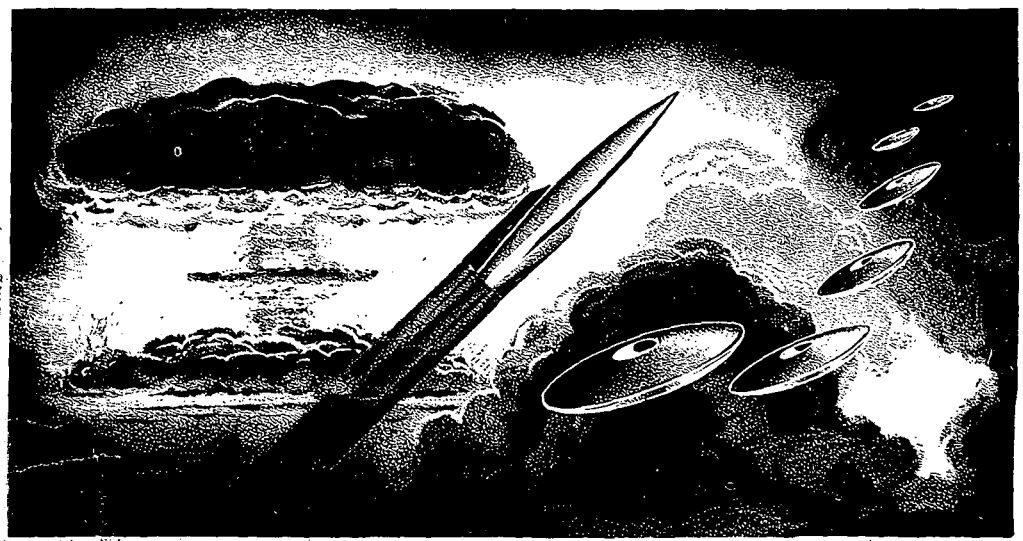

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